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"PERPLEXING QUESTIONS":
TALES OF SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN OF SHEBA
IN JEWISH LITERATURE

Scott Michael Corngold

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Advisor: Dr. Carole B. Balin

00-5116

"PERPLEXING QUESTIONS":
TALES OF SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN OF SHEBA
IN JEWISH LITERATURE

by Scott Michael Corngold

This thesis is a survey of texts about the encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Beginning with the source account in Tanakh (1 Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-12), material is also included from Talmud Bavli; Midrash Mishle; Targum Sheni to Esther; the Alphabet of Ben Sira; an early 18th century Yemenite folk tale; a reworking of the Arabic account for young readers by Chaim Nachman Bialik; and a poem, "The Visit of the Queen of Sheba," by Yehuda Amichai.

Original translations of each of these texts are presented, with annotations and introductions that provide background about the context of the excerpts in the larger work and within the genre of Jewish literature that they represent. They intend to provide the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate the distinct literary styles of Jewish tradition, and to demonstrate how different eras and different writers address the nagging questions raised by the Tanakh narrative.

Finally, as a synthesis of this material, an original creative reworking of the story has been attempted, appearing as the final piece presented in the thesis.

Nine chapters, 115 pages. March 8, 1999/20 Adar 5759

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Introduction

A foreign queen pays a visit to King Solomon, bringing gifts and riddles from her land, and lingering with him for a time before she returns home. His fame is what inspires her to make the journey, the widespread renown of his wisdom and wealth. Her name is not mentioned; it is up to later accounts to decide what to call her. Where the land is that she rules is uncertain as well; to the South, apparently, but that might either be down in the Arabian peninsula or across the Red Sea. Both Yemenite and Ethiopian tradition claim her as their own. She is quite possibly black, and quite possibly comely --perhaps the same black, comely woman sung about in Solomon's Song of Songs.

The text is reticent, to say the least, in telling what transpires when Solomon and the Queen of Sheba meet. She asks her questions, whatever those may be; he answers them and more. She observes his vast holdings, and is greatly awed, offering praise not only of him and his wisdom, prosperity, and justice, but of his God, too. The gifts are exchanged --unspecified other things are given to her, too-- and she and her attendants depart.

It takes only thirteen verses to tell the whole story in the First Book of Kings, twelve in the Second Chronicles reiteration. What is left unmentioned is at least as intriguing as the details that are reported. And that may be precisely the source of its continuing fascination, for it remains a tale strange and captivating enough to tantalize four distinct traditions --Jewish, Muslim, Ethiopian, and Christian-- throughout the three thousand years since the events

were said to have taken place.

The story has been revisited in almost every era and every genre of Jewish literature –Talmud, Targum, Midrash, Zohar, European and Yemenite folklore, early modern Hebrew fiction, and contemporary Israeli poetry—with each new version borrowing from accounts of the past and adding fresh elements of its own. The following pages offer several of the key texts, in original translations and with annotations.

Each of these texts presents a challenge for the translation to capture the content and flavor of the original, while rendering them in language that doesn't engulf readers in convolutions of the overly literal. The truism remains correct –no translation can really be "literal" anyway; all translation is interpretation. It is sometimes a tricky balancing act: to avoid letting the interpretation lose sight altogether of the literal; to find new idioms that convey at least a sense of the old ones; and simply to unpack the Hebrew of different eras that the authors themselves were often half-inventing as they were going along.

The survey of texts examined here offers the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate the vastly different literary styles of Jewish tradition: the terse, enigmatic language of Tanakh; the elliptical digressive logic and tangled grammatical analysis of the Talmud; the exegetical and aggadic melange of the Targum and Midrash; the insouciant sacrilege of a renegade text like the Alphabet of Ben Sira, which nevertheless has been corralled into the semi-official rabbinic canon; the aural rhythms, desert images, and vivid, sometimes

whimsical detail of a Yemenite folktale; the merging of Arabic legend with the Russian enlightenment sensibility of Bialik in his "children's story"; and the puns and homonyms, the elaborate alliteration, the ironic anachronisms and playful impertinence of Amichai's poetry. The survey also demonstrates how different eras and different writers address the nagging questions about this brief encounter: Was the meeting merely a matter of trade and diplomacy, or something even beyond a search for wisdom? What other factors motivated these two to meet, and what did they really think of each other? What, exactly, were the riddles traded between them? What else was discussed? Was all of their business conducted in the court, and what might have happened behind the closed doors of his chambers? And what other gifts did they give each other in parting?

Finally, as a synthesis of this material, acknowledging the irresistible urge to add another voice, I've attempted my own creative reworking of the story. It is the final piece presented here.

Tanakh: 1 Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-12

King Solomon is at the height of his power when the Queen of Sheba ventures onto the scene in the Tanakh texts. His reign has been secure and relatively peaceful; he has built his palace and consecrated the Temple; he is renowned across the earth for his wealth, and no less for his wisdom. "All the world came to pay homage to Solomon," the text tells us (1 Kings 10:24) --beginning with the queen.

She, too, has come having heard of his fame. She comes with "perplexing questions," the riddles that were apparently a part of diplomatic discourse, but perhaps with other matters on her mind and in her heart as well. What those matters are, however, are altogether uncertain; the text remains frustratingly --and perhaps purposely-- vague. We don't even know the riddles she asked him, or what his correct answers are.

Though we are told repeatedly in the Tanakh about Solomon's wisdom, we are only given one specific example of his wise answer to a hard question: his judgment over the baby disputed by two mothers (1 Kings 3:16-28). Elsewhere, the narrative in 1 Kings offers many more details about his wealth than about his intelligence.

The queen notices the wealth, too, of course, and her words of praise admire him for that --and for the magnificence of his building enterprise-- along with his wisdom. She is careful to pay tribute to his God as well, whom she credits for this wisdom and prosperity. It is her acknowledgment of God --and

God's favor over Israel— that seems to be the very point of this account, which serves to demonstrate not only Solomon's supremacy over all the rulers of the earth, but God's supremacy over the earth itself —and, to be sure, any false deities.

Her crediting of God for Solomon's wisdom is in keeping with the Tanakh text. We are told (1 Kings 3:5-12) how God appears to the king in a dream offering any gift of his choice, and is so delighted that Solomon asks for wisdom over riches, a long life, or the destruction of his enemies, that God grants all these favors. And we are told that the king uses his gifts to foster justice and righteousness. Indeed, his judgment over the disputed baby is a sensitive act in service to his people.

In the demonstration of his mental prowess before the Queen of Sheba, however, it is not easy to see if that is in service to anything other than his desire to impress a foreign dignitary, or even to charm and seduce a wealthy, perhaps beautiful woman.. Her words still praise his righteousness, but at this point we have to take the righteousness for granted.

Whether there is anything more to the encounter besides an exchange of wisdom, an exchange of gifts, and a chance for the queen to marvel over Solomon's works and Solomon's God is also left purposefully vague. Some of the language in the text hints, with very carefully chosen words, at romantic or sexual interest —but it only hints.

The context of the story hints as well. For the Queen of Sheba, it turns

out, is only the first mention of Solomon's propensity for making time with foreign women who have foreign gods. In the very next chapter of 1 Kings, we will read about the king's vast harem of wives and concubines: "King Solomon loved many foreign women" (1 Kings 11:1). It is behavior with serious consequences; these entanglements lead him down dangerous paths: "In his old age, his wives turned away Solomon's heart after other gods, and he was not as wholeheartedly devoted to Adonai his God as his father David had been" (1 Kings 11:4). And it is no coincidence that from this point, Solomon's reign is challenged by foreign adversaries and his power and majesty diminish, never to be regained.

The Text: 1 Kings 10:1-13

1) The Queen of Sheba, hearing¹ of Solomon's fame² in³ the name of Adonai,⁴ came⁵ to test⁶ him with perplexing questions.⁷

¹Verb form here, "shoma-at," to convey a sense of the present tense.

²Or "report", per BDB. This is not the first indication in the Tanakh of Solomon's far-reaching fame, that word about his wealth and wisdom had spread widely. It is mentioned in 1 Kings 5:9-14, where we are told "men of all peoples came to hear Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the earth..." The Queen of Sheba is the only woman to come from afar, although local Israelite women, namely the disputing mothers of 1 Kings 3:16-28, learn well his wisdom, too.

³Or "through."

⁴Attributing God here as the source of Solomon's wisdom, as the inspiration for his great works; and/or as an active force in moving this story forward, ensuring that the queen would hear about Solomon —and be intrigued by the reports.

⁵Repeated use of the verb "lavoh"/"to come" (three times in two verses) may be hinting at the sexual congress implication/meaning of the word elsewhere, eg, Genesis

2) And she came to Jerusalem with a heavily laden retinue,⁸ camels carrying spices and very much gold and precious stones.⁹ And she came to Solomon and spoke to him all that was in her heart's mind.¹⁰

6:4 (in reference to the line of the antediluvian generations); Genesis 16:2 (Sarah suggesting that Abraham consort with Hagar); Deuteronomy 22:13 (regarding marital laws), etc. Note in particular 2 Samuel 12:24 ("va-yavoh eleha...va-teled ben'i") He went to her...She bore him a son") regarding Solomon's own conception.

⁸Also "to try" and "to prove." BDB notes as well "to tempt" -- "but not in the modern sense of the word."

⁹Per BDB. "Riddles" is simplest translation, but seems pretty narrowly focussed, suggesting little more in this encounter than gamesmanship. Per its use in Psalm 49:5, the term also could convey a sense of difficult moral questions, though the connotation in Numbers 12:8 and elsewhere simply obscure utterances.

Besides the Solomon/Queen of Sheba story, the only other major account in the Tanakh involving "*chidot*" also features a sexually charged subtext. In Judges 14:10-20, Samson, when he marries his Philistine wife, poses a tough riddle to her countrymen as a kind of one-upsmanship. Caught in the middle, his bride coaxes the answer out of him, in a foreshadowing of the Delilah episode.

¹⁰"*Kaved*" meaning heavy -- a sense of being overburdened and overextended, an excessive or budget-straining show of pomp. The term also connotes honor/importance -- that this is a lavish retinue of dignitaries. "*Chayil*" could be taken as a military force, but that seems too limiting and giving too much a sense of confrontation.

⁸Literally "stone," singular.

¹⁰The term "*lev*" is used so interchangeably in Tanakh for both heart and mind that a fusion of both seems meant here and elsewhere: that matters of the heart and mind are inextricably linked. See, for example, Proverbs 15:13-14 (a Solomonic usage), where "*lev*" is used in the earlier verse in its sense of heart ("a joyful heart makes a cheerful face/a sad heart makes a despondent mood") and in the later verse in its sense of mind ("the mind of a prudent man seeks knowledge").

The "*lev*"/mind-heart connection is made several times specifically in reference to Solomon's wisdom: 1 Kings 3:9 -- Solomon asks God for "*lev shomea lishpot et amcha*" ("an understanding mind/heart to judge Your people"); 1 Kings 3:12 -- God grants his wish, giving Solomon "*lev chacham v'nachon*" ("a wise and discerning mind/heart"); and 1 Kings 5:9 -- God endows Solomon "*v'rochav lev ka-chol asher al s'fat ha-yam*" ("a

- 3) Solomon responded to her every word¹¹; there was not a single thing hidden from¹² the king—nothing that he did not answer her.
- 4) The Queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the house that he built;
- 5) the food at his table and the assembly of his servants;¹³ the attendance of his ministers and their clothing, plus his cupbearers;¹⁴ and his ascent that he made, up to the house of Adonai.¹⁵ And she was left breathless.¹⁶
- 6) And she said to the king: "It was true, the report that I heard in my land

mind/heart as vast as the sands of the seashore."

Note that in Ecclesiastes 5:1 (also Solomonic), as well as Isaiah 33:18, 59:13, Psalms 19:15, 49:4, "lev" is a source of speech as well.

¹¹Idiomatic; more literally "expounded," per BDB.

¹²Or "unknown to." Numerous usages of the verb "l'ha-alim"/"to hide" or "conceal" in the Tanakh, including notions of hidden sins (eg, Psalm 90:8) and concealed, elusive wisdom (eg, Job 28:21).

¹³Or "courtiers" (or some other higher class of attendant).

¹⁴Or "his drinking vessels."

¹⁵The pomp and circumstance of the processional. Alternatively "his offering that he offered up at the house of Adonai," referring to the magnificence of his sacrifice. There might also be a sexual implication to the queen's breathless reaction to Solomon's "ascent."

¹⁶Idiomatic (taking after JPS translation). More literally, "there was no more breath/spirit in her," but the context does not seem to suggest a dispirited sense of defeat that might be conveyed in the literal translation. The connotation of "breathlessness," rather, conveys a sense of excitement and appreciative awe—along with just a hint of being bested—that continues the tone of two equals meeting and communing and possibly continuing in a kind of mutual seduction.

about your property¹⁷ and your wisdom,¹⁸

7) but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw, and, behold, the half of it was not told me. You have surpassed¹⁹ in wisdom and prosperity²⁰ the renown that I heard.

8) Happy are your people; happy are these servants of yours, the ones who attend you constantly, the ones who hear your wisdom.²¹

9) And praised is Adonai, your God, who delights in you to set you on the throne of Israel. In Adonai's eternal love of Israel, He placed you as king to do justice and righteousness."

¹⁷Literally "your things."

¹⁸The queen's praise --first of his wealth and then of his wisdom-- reverses the order in which she saw these attributes. It would seem, then, that Solomon's flashier virtues grabbed her attention more. Lest we consider her a shallow woman, though, by the next verse her priorities are straight. This would suggest, then, that Solomon's wealth was so vast, that anyone could have overlooked his subtler but more sensitive skills, a warning against style-over-substance that offers a wider moral lesson.

¹⁹Literally "added."

²⁰Or "goodness" ("tov" conveying a sense of prosperity can also be seen in Deuteronomy 26:11, Isaiah 52:7, and Jeremiah 8:13, etc.).

²¹The wording here almost implies that the audience that gets to appreciate Solomon's wisdom is essentially limited at this point to his court, that it is no longer being used for the widespread good of the people. Indeed, trading riddles with a foreign queen is a far more private, almost frivolous use of his powers than, say, determining the proper custody of a child. The subtle edge to these words may be a veiled playful or serious reprimand from the queen or the biblical narrator (though if from the queen, it is inconsistent with her praise in the following verse).

10) She gave the king one hundred twenty²² of gold and a very great amount of spices and precious stones. There never again came spices like these in such quantity as the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

11) Also, the fleet of Hiram,²³ which carried gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a very great amount of almug wood and precious stones;

12) the king made from the almug wood a support for the house of Adonai and for the king's house, and lyres and harps for singers. There never had come almug wood like it²⁴ and none has been seen to this day.

13) And King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all that she desired²⁵ that she requested, along with what he gave her according to the bounty of King Solomon.²⁶ And she turned²⁷ and she went back to her land, she and her servants.

²²Per BDB, one talent is about 60 kg in the Babylonian standard. This is a considerable gift.

²³The King of Tyre, who supplied Solomon with building materials, craftsmen, and furnishing for the construction of the Temple.

²⁴Either in quality or quantity.

²⁵Or "everything that delighted her."

²⁶He gave her gifts in addition to the customary royal tribute that he would have bestowed.

²⁷Or "returned"

The reiteration of the story of Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba in 2 Chronicles is part of the summary of Biblical history, from Adam to the destruction of the first Temple, that comprises both books of Chronicles, and is one of many sections from 1 Kings that is repeated there, with mainly only minor text variations.

The Text: 2 Chronicles 9:1-12

- 1) The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame,²⁸ and came to test Solomon with perplexing questions in Jerusalem, with a heavily laden retinue, and camels carrying spices and much gold and precious stones. And she came to Solomon and spoke with him all that was in her heart's mind.
- 2) Solomon responded to her every word, nothing was hid from Solomon, and there was nothing that he did not answer her.
- 3) The Queen of Sheba saw the wisdom of Solomon and the house that he built;
the food at his table, and the attendance of his servants; the service of his ministers and their clothing; his cupbearers and their clothing; and his ascent that he made, up to the house of Adonai. And she was left breathless.

²⁸"L'shem Adonai" is notably missing from the Chronicles version, giving this rendition a less divine tone. Although the queen later will duly give praise to Adonai, God's involvement in this story --and God's credit as the source of wisdom and inspiration-- is less evident, due to this absent phrase.

This is the most significant text difference in the 2 Chronicles version of the story. The other differences are mostly minor text variants (in almost every verse). The different wording is conveyed in the body of this translation.

- 5) And she said to the king: "It is true, the report that I heard in my land about your property and your wisdom,
- 6) but I did not believe their reports until I came and my own eyes saw, and, behold, half of the greatness of your wisdom was not told me. You surpass the renown that I heard.
- 7) Happy are your people; happy are these servants of yours, the ones who attend you constantly and hear your wisdom.
- 8) And praised is Adonai, your God, who delights in you to set you on his throne as king, for Adonai your God. In the love of God for Israel, to establish it forever, he made you king over them to do justice and righteousness."
- 9) She gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold and a very abundant amount of spices and precious stones. There had not been such spices as the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.
- 10) Also, the servants of Hiram³⁰ and the servants of Solomon, which brought gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a very great amount of algum³¹ wood and precious stones;
- 11) the king made from the algum wood pathways³² to the house of Adonai and to the king's house, and lyres and harps for singers. None was seen like

³⁰"Hiram" in 1 Kings. Hiram is an alternate form of Hiram's name, appearing elsewhere in Tanakh, especially throughout 2 Chronicles.

³¹"Almug" in 1 Kings; a probable text error here of metastasis.

³²BDB believes "m'silot" here to be a typo for "mis'ad" as in 1 Kings 10:12.

them before in the land of Judah.

12) And King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all that she desired that she requested, along with what she brought to the king.³³ And she turned around and she went back to her land, she and her servants.

³³The equivalent passage in 1 Kings 10:13 speaks of Solomon's additional gifts here, not the Queen of Sheba's.

Talmud Bavli: Sanhedrin 20b and Bava Batra 15b

As the text of tractate Sanhedrin discusses the nature of divine versus human kingship, using King Solomon's reign as a prototype of Jewish monarchy, the Gemara digresses with a short, evocative summary of his gradual loss of power over the course of his rule.

The text brings up the fanciful notion, not uncommon in rabbinic literature, that Solomon's dominion extended beyond Israel and even the human realm itself, that he ruled over the bird and animal kingdoms, and the spirit worlds as well (Bereshit Rabbah 34:12 goes so far as to claim that "the power over the animal world, lost by Adam through his sin, was regained by Solomon"). The legend may be based on an expansive reading of 1 Kings 5:13, which says that Solomon "discoursed about trees...and he discoursed about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes," the creative midrashists suggesting he not only discoursed about them, but with them, too.

The amoraim, then, use this legend to amplify an object lesson of sorts about the flaws of human rulers, and Solomon in particular. The fact that this king's dwindling spheres of power peaked with his sovereignty over the natural and supernatural reaches, but concluded with only his bed as his dominion suggests that his sexual appetites were largely to blame. And this is a common interpretation about the arc of his life and career as presented in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, that he began losing his grip on the kingdom once his focus shifted from ruling his country to cavorting with his huge harem of foreign, idolatrous

wives and concubines. A pattern if not begun, then surely intensified, by his encounter with the Queen of Sheba.

The Text: Sanhedrin 20b

Resh Lakish said: At the outset, Solomon ruled over the upper beings, as it is said: "Solomon sat on the throne of God" (1 Chronicles 29:13). But ultimately, he ruled only over the lower beings, as it is said: "For he held dominion over the whole region from Tifshach, even to Aza" (1 Kings 5:4). Rav and Shmuel: one said Tifshach is at one end of the world and Aza is at the other end of the world; and one said that Tifshach and Aza were adjoined, one to the other — just as he ruled over Tifshach and Aza, so he ruled over the entire world. And ultimately, he ruled only over Israel, as it is said: "I, Kohelet, I was King... over Israel..." (Ecclesiastes 1:12). And ultimately, he ruled only over Jerusalem, as it is said: "...the words of Kohelet, son of David, King of Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:1). And ultimately, he ruled only over his bed, as it is written: "Here is the bed of Solomon..." (Song of Songs 3:7).¹

¹Quoting Song of Songs in particular seems to suggest, as does the quotation itself, that the diminution of Solomon's sovereignty is tied to his sexual exploits.

The domains cited in tracing this step-by-step diminution—from the upper and lower beings to just the earth itself; then only to Israel and further limited to Jerusalem; and finally narrowed still further to his bed alone—are echoed in the narrowing of the scene in Targum Sheni to Esther (see next section): First, we read of Solomon's dominion over the upper and lower beings alike, and then of the worldly extent of his kingdom. Next, the Queen of Sheba is called to attend him in Israel; she travels to him, the text tells us, to Jerusalem; and ultimately, she winds up in his chamber, presumably, finally, in his bed.

The only specific mention of the Queen of Sheba in the Talmud occurs in a brief passage in Bava Batra. There, a baraita raises questions about the character of Job: whether he was a Jew and when he was supposed to have lived. Several possibilities are offered (one is that he lived during the period of the patriarchs and that he married Jacob's daughter, Dinah). Rabbi Nassan looks to the book of Job itself, which mentions an attack on Job's household by Sheba, and suggests he lived in the time of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. After a short digression, the Gemara parses the term "malkat Sh'va," with the stunning assertion that there was never any Queen of Sheba at all.

This argument requires a convoluted and, as Maharsha observes, faulty grammatical analysis, but since the Talmudic sages were hardly poor students of Hebrew, something else is clearly going on here. The rabbis, it seems, are willfully misreading the clear meaning of the Bible text, because they are uncomfortable with its sexual implications. But whether they are anticipating later midrashic and folktale accounts that take up the erotic component more explicitly, or are reacting to saucy versions that were already around, a little smichut wasn't enough to squelch it.

The Text: Bava Batra 15b

R. Natan says: Job lived in the days of the Kingdom of Sheba,² as it is said:

²Meaning during the time of Solomon, according to Maharsha.

"Sheba fell upon him and took them" (Job 1:15)³... R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Anyone who says that "*malkat Sh'va*" is a woman is, to the contrary, in error; what is "*malkat Sh'va*"? The kingdom/rulership/sovereign of Sheba.⁴

³The ninth century Targum to Job uses this same verse to implicate the Queen of Sheba specifically (under the guise of Lilith) in the torments of Job.

⁴Rendering the word "*malkut*" rather than "*malkat*," playing with the *smichut*. Maharsha (pointing out the bible text treats "*malkat Sh'va*" as a feminine noun) reads the Gemara as asserting that the queen was sovereign in her own right and not through royal marriage to a male monarch of Sheba.

Midrash Mishle 1:23-53¹

Dating probably from the ninth century, Midrash Mishle is rabbinic compilation of aggadic and exegetical commentary on the Book of Proverbs, interspersed with parables, aphorisms, short homiletic interpretations, and narrative digressions. The extant text is incomplete.

The text begins with the opening, attributive verse of Proverbs --"The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel"-- and, immediately citing Job 28:12 --"But where can wisdom be found; where is the source of understanding?-- launches into a discussion on the nature and basis of wisdom. Identifying the author of Proverbs as Israel's fountain of wisdom, the rabbis offer proof texts from 1 Kings, where Solomon asks God for the gift of wisdom (3:5), and where he is proclaimed the wisest man of his age (5:9-10). They then cite his encounter with the Queen of Sheba, and his answers to her "perplexing questions," as further evidence of his wisdom.

Not content, as the Biblical text is, with merely stating that Solomon indeed had good answers to all of the queen's questions, the midrash actually demonstrates specific evidence, presenting a brief scene from their meeting which details four challenging riddles that the queen asked him, and his correct responses. These riddles are all different from the ones posed in the Targum Sheni account, although the third riddle, where the queen asks Solomon to

¹Visotzky, Burton L, ed. *Midrash Mishle*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary Press, 1990; pp3-7.

distinguish between similarly dressed boys and girls, has close parallels to a passage in the Targum Sheni where the queen sends ahead to Solomon, as part of her gifts of tribute, a retinue of six thousand identically garbed young men and women.

Oddly, the rabbis seem a bit too easily content here that these riddles are legitimate signs of Solomon's wisdom. Yet, like the Targum, Solomon and the queen's conversation actually consists more of clever brain-teasers than deep thoughts, hardly the exchange of true wisdom and knowledge between two sagacious rulers. Indeed, with their banter about niddah and circumcision, there is a charged sexual undercurrent in their words to each another. But there is indeed depth as well. Here, unlike the Targum, both the king and queen attribute God, humbly and sincerely, as the true source of Solomon's wisdom. That point is underscored in his solution to her fourth riddle, where prostrating pagans fall before the holy ark and Solomon makes textual references to Job and Balaam, gentiles, who, like the queen, acknowledge the rule of God.

A later Yemenite midrashic text, *Midrash ha-Hefez*, expands upon the riddles of *Midrash Mishle*. Compiled in 1428 by Yahya ibn Suleiman al-Tabib, a physician and scholar, it is a Hebrew and Aramaic anthology of Torah and Haftarah commentary and aggadah, considered one of the most important Yemenite midrashim. There, the four riddles of *Midrash Mishle* are reproduced verbatim, followed by fifteen more riddles, culled, apparently, from several different folklore versions of the story. Twelve of these new questions play with

events and characters in the Tanakh, picking up on the motif of the queen's second riddle from Midrash Mishle (referring to the daughters of Lot), and turning the queen's testing of Solomon into a Bible quiz of sorts. At the same time, there is an overlay of deeper meaning. These questions, speaking of God, the creation of the universe, the nature of men and women and their place in the divine order, all articulate that same notion of God's omniscience, of Adonai as the source of all wisdom, conveyed in the riddle-solving ability of Solomon in Midrash Mishle.

The Text

Another interpretation of the verse, "From where can wisdom be found?" (Job 28:12): This is about the Queen of Sheba, who heard of Solomon's wisdom. She said: "I will go and see whether or not he is wise."

From what source did she hear of Solomon's wisdom? As it is said: "And the Queen of Sheba, hearing of the fame of Solomon through the name of Adonai, came to test him with perplexing riddles" (1 Kings 10:1).²

And what are these "riddles"? R. Yermiyahu said: words in the form of parables.

She said to him: "Are you Solomon? For I have heard of your and of your wisdom."

²This proof-text, in essence, answers two questions at once: it not only provides the scriptural source for our knowing the queen had heard of Solomon's fame, but also suggests *how* she heard it -- "b'shem Adonai."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "If I ask you a certain thing, will you answer me?"

He said: "...For Adonai gives wisdom from his mouth, knowledge and discernment (Proverbs 2:6)."³

She said: Seven go out and nine enter; two pour and one drinks."

He said: "Certainly, seven days of niddah go out and nine months of gestation enter; two breasts pour, and a newborn drinks."

She said: "You are a great sage, but if I ask you something else, will you answer me?"

He said: "...For Adonai gives wisdom."

She said: "Who is the woman who says to her son: 'Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband; you are my son,' and I am your sister?"

He said: "Certainly, the daughters of Lot say to their sons: 'Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband; you are my son, and I am your sister.'"⁴

Still another example she prepared for him. She brought in before him boys and girls, all of them looking alike, all of them the same height, all of them

³Solomon and the queen both take great pains throughout this account to credit God for his wisdom, in stark contrast, for example, to the Solomon and Sheba of Targum Sheni.

⁴This pagan Queen of Sheba is quizzing Solomon on his Bible trivia!

dressed the same. She said to him: "Distinguish the boys from the girls."⁵

Immediately, he nodded to his eunuch, who brought in to him roasted grain and nuts. He began distributing them. The boys, who were unembarrassed, took it in their garments.⁶ The girls, who were embarrassed, took it in their turbans. He said to her: "These are girls and those are boys."

She said to him: My son,⁷ you are a great sage." Yet one more example she prepared before him. She brought before him circumcised men and uncircumcised men, all of them looking alike, all of them the same height, all of them dressed the same. She said to him: "Distinguish for me the circumcised men from the uncircumcised men."⁸

Immediately, he nodded to the High Priest, who opened the Ark of the Covenant. The circumcised men among them kneeled to half their height and no further; their faces were filled with the splendor of the *Shechinah*. And the

⁵Each of the queen's first three riddles is about some aspect of femininity, while her final riddle turns suddenly and explicitly to maleness. All of them, then, add a sexual edge to her tests and to their seemingly proper exchange of words.

⁶Never taught about needing to be modest while wearing skirts, the boys would not have been embarrassed to lift up the bottom hem of their garments and use it as a makeshift pouch to collect the treats.

⁷A very curious appellation, which on the surface seems to attempt to desexualize the relationship. Given the insinuating sexual content of her riddles, though, "my son" has the opposite effect: a condescending label that comes close to being a sexual gibe, even as she praises his great wisdom.

⁸Other accounts portray the queen as obsessed with the notion and practice of circumcision, and her desire to see uncircumcised men, then, becomes a chief motivation for her journey to Israel

uncircumcised men among them immediately fell on their faces.⁹ He said to her:

"These are the circumcised ones and those are the uncircumcised."

She asked: "How do you know?"

He said to her: "From Balaam, is it not written: '...who envisages a vision of Shadai' (Numbers 24:4)? Had he not fallen, he still would not have seen anything. If you want to learn from Balaam, come and learn from Job.¹⁰ At the time that three of his friends came to comfort him, he said to them: 'I, too, have a mind like you; I will not fall beneath you.'¹¹ (Job 12:3)-- meaning, 'do I not fall like you?'¹²

At that moment, she said to him: "I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw, and, behold, the half of it was not told me. You have surpassed in wisdom and prosperity the renown that I heard. Happy are your people; happy are these servants of yours, the ones who attend you constantly.

⁹As gentiles, they could not bear the intensity of looking upon the radiance of the *Shechinah*.

¹⁰Like the Queen of Sheba, Balaam and Job are prominent Biblical gentiles; all three of them come to know the power and supremacy of Adonai. The queen is linked to Balaam elsewhere, too. The eleventh century Muslim author al-Thal'abi, who collected an anthology of Arabic tales about the Queen of Sheba, noted that one of the names for the queen in Muslim tradition is "Bal'amah," the female Balaam. And in the right portal of the north transept of Chartres cathedral, the Queen of Sheba is portrayed sculpturally, positioned in between Balaam and Solomon.

¹¹Just as Job had greater wisdom and discernment than his comforters, Solomon is intimating to the queen, so Solomon is wiser than she.

¹²Solomon's reinterpretation of this line suggests that Job, like his fellow (uncircumcised) gentile Balaam, falls prostrate before God.

the ones who hear your wisdom. And praised is Adonai, your God, who delights in you to set you on the throne of Israel. In Adonai's eternal love of Israel, He placed you as king to do justice and righteousness" (1 Kings 10:7-9).

Targum Sheni to Esther¹

The second Targum to the Book of Esther is far more than an Aramaic translation of the biblical text. Only seventy-five verses from the source material are, in fact, directly rendered, and the lengthy additions go well beyond a simple reworking and exegesis. A novella of sorts, possibly intended for home reading and amusement during the Purim season, the Targum embellishes the story of the Jewish queen of Persia and the rescue of her people from the brink of genocide with vivid description, elaborate subplots, and allusions and references to other biblical characters and narratives, making ample use of material from the aggadic tradition. It seems to make use as well of Arabic sources—with several elements in the passages about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, for example, in common with the Koran's account of their meeting—although it is also possible that Muslim scripture used this rendering as its own source.

The date of the text is unclear and much disputed; various scholars have offered evidence suggesting anywhere from the fourth to the eleventh century. And given the somewhat satirical nature of much of the Esther story (and of the holiday it engendered), it is not certain how much of this retelling was meant to be read tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless, the Targum has come to be accepted as midrash to be taken seriously, commentary on the Book of Esther elemental

¹(Hebrew text:) Cohen, Tzvi, ed. *Targum Sheni to the Scroll of Esther*. Jerusalem, 1985; pp70-73. (Aramaic text:) Kasher, Menachem, ed. *Torah Sh'lemah: Megillat Esther*. Jerusalem: Noam Aharon, 1994.

enough to be included in the Mikraot G'dolot.

Early in the text of the Targum, the encounter of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is interjected into the narrative of Esther and King Ahashueres. The context is an extended digression about the King of Persia's throne --mentioned briefly in Esther 1:2 as preparations for the great banquet are made-- which is described in elaborate detail and identified as the very throne of King Solomon himself, part of the booty plundered by Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered Jerusalem. The throne, then, passed hands from one vanquishing nation to another, until it fell under the possession of Ahashueres, who is portrayed here (along with Solomon) as one of the ten kings who ruled the entire world. The Targum continues with a brief biography of Solomon: his rise to power, his supremacy over the other nations, his dominion over the animal and spirit worlds, and his wisdom and riddle-solving abilities that gained him widespread fame.

In celebration of his renown and power, Solomon calls for a banquet, which begins the story of his encounter with the Queen of Sheba. The parallels to Ahashueres' banquet, which initiates Esther's story, are clear and intentional. But then the text concentrates on midrashic commentary and elucidation of the account in 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9, seeking to fill in many of the gaps in the terse biblical narrative, and to answer some of the perplexing questions that the source story raises. The Targum version attempts to demonstrate, by showing rather than simply telling, just how powerful and wise Solomon is. It

offers, then, details about his near-supernatural ability over animal and spirit life, and actually lists the "hard questions" and answers between him and the Queen of Sheba. And he indeed is sharp; so is she for concocting these tricky riddles. But it is easy to be left feeling somewhat unsatisfied by the content of their discourse, which demonstrates really just a parlor-room cleverness more than any real sense of righteous wisdom that we might hope to see from a king whose discernment was once used in the service of justice and the well-being of his people. This Solomon appears far more focused on getting his neighboring rulers to submit to him than in earning the love and esteem of the citizens of his own land. Moreover, there is something strangely missing here that did appear, at least, in the Tanakh text: neither Solomon nor the Queen of Sheba credits God with any of this display of power, intelligence, or wealth. And, for our more prurient interests, the Targum leaves one other intriguing question unanswered: there is still no explicit indication of any romantic or sexual tryst between the two.

The Text

The king was in a merry mood, drunk with wine. So he summoned all the kings of the East and West, who were close to the land of Israel, and seated them in the royal palace.

He commanded his servants to play before them with lyres and cymbals, drums and harps, which his father, King David, had played for them. Still in a

merry drunken mood, he commanded the birds of the sky, the beasts of the field and the creatures of the earth, demons and spirits to appear before him.² They danced and leapt and twirled to show the kings sitting with him his magnificent splendor. The scribes of the king had called them by their names, and all gathered together and came by their own will, neither in chains nor iron fetters; no human drove them there.

At that moment --missing from its place among the birds-- the prairie cock³ could not be found, and the king commanded to bring him; he was furious with him and intended to punish him. The prairie cock responded to the king, saying: "Listen closely and hear this, my lord, king of all the earth; you will scarcely believe your ears! It has been three months since I said to myself: I will fly around the entire world and I will see if there is a land or dominion that has not

²Obvious parallels to the narrative in the Book of Esther: the drunken banquet with the summoned lords from all the lands of the realm; the commanded dancing and the absent dancer --both the bird and the Queen of Sheba herself, as variations on the rebellious Vashti.

³Not a hoopoe, as virtually every later variation on this story will have it. The change of species may not be incidental; making the bird a hoopoe does add a further religious and sexual edge to the story. The hoopoe --a scavenger bird with a circular crest and cinnamon-speckled plumage, and somewhat filthy habits-- is listed twice in the Bible (Leviticus 11:19, Deuteronomy 14:18) as an unkosher animal; yet Muslim tradition regards it as one of four species protected (possibly due to its reputation as an able water-spotter in the desert) by the word of Mohammed. It is a harbinger of spring in Israel, and its appearance in various Arabian and African legends (and here as well) carries strong sexual connotations. Moreover, the Hebrew "*duchifat*" ("hoopoe") is a feminine noun (linking it, then, to the queen), while "*targil*" ("prairie cock") is masculine.

submitted to my lord the king.⁴ I searched, and I saw one state in the eastern lands. Its name is Sheba and the name of its capital is Kitor. Its earth is gold dust; silver lies around outside like manure. The trees planted there have abided since the six days of creation, and they drink water from the garden of Eden. Its population is great, their heads crowned. But they do not know how to wage war; they can't strike with swords or shoot with bows. And a woman rules over them!⁵ And now, if I have found favor in your eyes, my lord king, and it seems proper to you, I will gird my loins and I will rise and go to the land of Sheba, to the city of Kitor, and I will bind their rulers in chains and shackle them in iron fetters,⁶ and I'll bring them to my lord king."

Those words pleased the king, so the king's scribes were summoned and they wrote a message and they tied it to the wing of the prairie cock. He soared up to the high skies and all the birds flew along behind him, and they went to the land of Sheba, to the city of Kitor.

In the morning,⁷ the Queen of Sheba went out, in her usual fashion, to

⁴The bird, in informer mode, is a little Haman-like here, squealing to the king about a people within his realm who are not submitting to his will.

⁵The bird means this, clearly, as a further indication of their weakness and inferiority --no strong nation would ever be ruled by a woman.

⁶Same fetter language as in the beginning of the story, to different effect; unlike the animals and the spirits, the Sheban nobility and the queen would be brought to Solomon against their will.

⁷A quick journey by the birds (given Sheba is a seven-year caravan away, as the text later says), suggesting even further the supernatural power of Solomon's sway

bow down to the sun ---and the birds were darkening the light of the sun! The queen raised her arm from her robes and rent them; she was that staggered and amazed. The prairie cock landed before her, with the message tied to its wing. The queen opened the message and so she read:

"From me, King Solomon: Peace to you and peace to your ministers.

Do you not know the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave me command over the beasts of the field and birds of the sky, over the demons and spirits, and all the kings of the East and West, the North and South? They come to me and inquire after my welfare. Now, if you all will be willing to obey and come to me to seek my welfare, I will pay do honor to you greater than to the kings assembled before me. But if you refuse and do not seek my welfare, I will send kings, soldiers, and horsemen after you. And if you say, 'Who are these kings and soldiers and horsemen of King Solomon's?': The beasts of the field --those are the kings; the birds of the sky --the horsemen; the demons and spirits --the soldiers. And the demons and the spirits will strangle you in your beds right in your homes. The beasts of the field will slay you outside and the birds of the sky will eat your flesh."

When the Queen of Sheba heard the words of that letter, she fell back, raising her arm from her robes again and rent them once more. She ordered the

over the animal kingdom.

elders and ministers to assemble and said to them: "Do you know what King Solomon sent me?"

They answered, saying: "We do not know of King Solomon and we do not accept his rule."

But her heart was not satisfied by their words, and she didn't trust them. So she gathered all the sailors of her land and commanded them to load their ships with gifts and pearls and precious stones. She sent to King Solomon six thousand young men and women, all of them born in the same year, in the same month, on the same day, at the same hour; all of them the same height and build, and all of them in purple clothes.⁸ And she sent a message with them to King Solomon, and so it read: "From the city of Kitor to the land of Israel is a journey of seven years. If it please, I will come beseech you, arriving within three years."⁹

And so it was, by three years the Queen of Sheba came to King Solomon, nearing Jerusalem. When he heard that the queen had approached,¹⁰ he sent Benayahu ben Yehoyada.¹¹ He resembled a hind that comes at dawn, a bright

⁸A huge flock of people, as it were, that tops Solomon's phalanx of birds.

⁹The queen, perhaps, demonstrates here her own near-supernatural powers, to make that trip so quickly.

¹⁰As in the biblical text, there is much repeating of the verb "*javoh*," again with the verb's sexual subtext.

¹¹Mentioned in Tanakh, first as one of David's ablest fighting men, "a brave soldier who performed great deeds" (2 Samuel 23:20). Benayahu is the first of the

star that glitters among the firmament, the lily that grows on the water banks.¹²

When the Queen of Sheba saw him, she got down from her carriage. Benayahu ben Yehoyada amazed her and said to her: "Why did you come down from your carriage?"

The queen answered him: "Are you not King Solomon?"

Benayahu ben Yehoyada answered her: "No, I am not King Solomon; just one of the attendants appointed by him."

Immediately she turned to her ministers and offered an analogy¹³: "If you do not see the lion, behold, you see its lair. And if you don't see King Solomon, behold, you see the handsome appearance of the man appointed by him."¹⁴ And Benayahu ben Yehoyada brought her to King Solomon.

Solomon heard that the queen had arrived, and he received her in his

royal attendants to swear loyalty when David anoints Solomon (1 Kings 1:36), and becomes a key aide to Solomon and a hit man of sorts, credited with slaying the king's scheming rival Adonijah, as well as Joab and Shimei."

¹²Solomon and the queen both keep working to impress one another with their emissaries --the vast numbers of them and striking appearance and arrival of them-- rather than with their own personal attributes, at least initially. The scrutiny and game playing between two royals involves their holdings and domain as much as themselves.

¹³Literally, she offers a "*mashal*," a term ("proverb"), of course, closely connected to Solomon. That this queen speaks *mishlim* of her own suggests bonds of wisdom connecting the two.

¹⁴The attention paid (by the queen and the text itself) to Benayahu's handsome appearance (unremarked upon in biblical descriptions of him) conveys a sense that even before their actual encounter, the meeting of Solomon and Sheba is sexually charged.

crystal palace. When the queen saw him there, she thought that he was sitting in water, and she lifted up the fringes of her garment to pass, so that her legs were uncovered, and it was seen that they were hairy.¹⁵ King Solomon said to her: "You are beautiful --beauty is womanly-- but you are hairy --hairy is manly. Hair is beautiful in men but shameful in women."¹⁶

The queen said to him: "My lord king, I will challenge you with three riddles. If you solve them for me, I'll know that you are a wise man. If not, you are just like the rest of the men."¹⁷

She posed an analogy, saying: "A wooden well and an iron pail: it draws up stones and pours up water: What is it?"

The king answered: "A tube of eye-shadow."¹⁸

The queen asked: "It comes from the ground and it consumes dust from

¹⁵The word "se'irof" here could also be translated as "goats," thus either following or initiating the tradition that she was suspected of having goat legs. In one of the old Christian Arabic legends about the queen, for example, her mother, while pregnant, had coveted a fat, handsome goat "with greedy desire," and God punished her by causing the child in her womb to be fashioned with one goat's foot and one human foot.

¹⁶The queen is also a woman in a man's position, in a man's world. This might be teasing (or ridiculing) her for being uppity, acknowledging Solomon's confusion about dealing with a woman he finds desirable who is actually is social/political/ intellectual equal.

¹⁷The queen's response is a bit of a teasing jab herself: "Let's see how smart you really are."

¹⁸The "well" is the container; the "bucket" the applicator; the "rocks" the makeup; the "water" the tears that flow when the makeup is applied. Though the queen leads off with a "woman's" riddle, the king, unfazed, responds in an instant.

the earth; it is poured like water and illuminates the house: What is it?"

The king answered: "Naphtha."^{19 20}

The queen asked: "In the gust that precedes everything, it yells a great and bitter yell and bows its head like a reed; it is a luxury for the wealthy and a disgrace for the poor; an honor for the dead and a humiliation for the living; joy for the birds and sorrow for the fish: What is it?"

The king answered: "Flax."^{21 22}

She said to the king: "It is true, the report that I heard in my land about your things and your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw, and, behold, the half of it was not told me. You have surpassed in wisdom and prosperity the renown that I heard. Happy are your people; happy are those servants of yours, the ones who attend you constantly, the ones who hear your wisdom."²³

¹⁹A kind of kerosene/lamp fuel.

²⁰Solomon's pithy, one-word answers to her riddles are in stark and amusing contrast to his long-windedness evidenced earlier in the blustery note he sent the queen. Here, he is in a quiz-kid mode, firing back quick and accurate solutions, his very terseness a showy kind of demonstration of total mastery.

²¹Flax is made out of reeds, which whistle and bend in the wind. It is used to make both fine linen for the wealthy and cheap cloth for the poor, shrouds for the dead, and nooses to execute the living. Its seeds are fed on by birds, and it can be woven into fishnets.

²²While these riddles (and their answers) are clever, they are awfully mundane, and indicative of little more than parlor-game agility.

²³Her words from 1 Kings 10:6-8.

He brought her inside to his royal palace.²⁴ And when the Queen of Sheba saw the greatness and majesty of King Solomon, she began to praise the one who created him. She said: "Praised is Adonai, your God, who delights in you and set you on the throne of Israel. In Adonai's eternal love of Israel, He placed you as king to do justice and righteousness."

She gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold and a very great amount of spices and precious stones [...]. And King Solomon gave to the queen all that she desired which she requested, besides what he gave her according to the bounty of King Solomon. And she turned and she went back to her land, she and her servants.²⁵

The kings of the West and East, North and South, when they heard of his fame, were in awe, and all of them thronged to him from their lands, with great honor and much dignity, with gold and silver and precious stones and pearls.

²⁴This could also be translated as "...inside his Temple," with an odd kind of double-entendre: is he bringing her into the holy of holies or into his own chamber? Things get even more suggestive when the queen sees "*g'dulato*"--"his largeness". The unclear Aramaic term here, "*tarchuta*", has been read as "apartment" or "tribunal."

²⁵This paragraph quotes directly from 1 Kings 10:9-12.

The Alphabet of Ben Sira¹

A satirical, even heretical "pseudepigraphical" work that may never have meant to be taken as serious Midrash, the Alphabet of Ben Sira became accepted into the canon of rabbinic literature as early as the twelfth or thirteenth century, once Ashkenazic mystics began citing it with some regularity. The date of the text itself has not been even vaguely determined; the best that can be surmised is that it is a medieval work, probably written after the rise of Islam. It is apparently the product of a single author, although there are now four text versions of the original.

The iconoclastic tone of the piece is evident from the beginning, which offers a scandalous biography of the early life of the eponymous Ben Sira: He is the product of an incestuous relationship between the prophet Jeremiah and his daughter ("Ben Sira" even has the same numerologic value as "Yirmiyahu"). Except for using the same name and quoting proverbs and epigrams from the second century "Wisdom of Ben Sira," the story does not strive to make much a connection back to the Ben Sira of the Apochrypha. Rather, it sends this character on a picaresque journey of sorts, amassing stories arranged according to the letters of the alphabet (thus the "Alphabet" of the title).

In the fourth and longest part of the work, Ben Sira's adventures in the court of Nebuchadnezzar are recounted. Much of the text is in the form of

¹Yassif, Eli, ed. *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Study*. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984; pp217-218.

anecdotes he tells in response to questions asked by the Babylonian king, which Ben Sira peppers with off-color details and slanderous descriptions of heroes and heroines of the Bible. One of these anecdotes concerns the encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Ben Sira brings up the subject after he presents a strange, hairless rabbit before the king. The obvious questions about the creature lead directly to Ben Sira's gossipy account about Solomon and the hairy foreign queen. Keeping with the tone of the piece, he offers the dirtiest possible reading about their encounter—with some insults for Nebuchadnezzar added, too—taking what was mere nuance in the Bible and what was still not entirely explicit in earlier midrashic accounts like Targum Sheni and turning it into a heated little tale of romance-free sex. No question here what kind of desires were felt and met, whether Solomon found the queen sufficiently womanly, or what happened when they finished asking each other riddles.

The tone is comic and snide, but it addresses an important and serious part of the tradition: the legend that Solomon and the queen's tryst resulted in the conception of Nebuchadnezzar, conquerer of Israel and destroyer of the Temple. However impossible that might technically be on a historic level, there is a larger truth and lesson being conveyed. In consorting with foreign, pagan women, Solomon—literally—sowed the seed of Israel's destruction.

7

The Text (Manuscript A)

Nebuchadnezzar asked Ben Sira: The hare; how was its head made smooth?"

He answered: "A miracle of lime!"

Nebuchadnezzar asked: "What is this miracle of lime?"

Ben Sira responded: "A head-shearing thing that plucks off the hair, and it is made thus: lime is poured in arsenic --and that is the miracle of lime. But if you really want to know, ask your mother and she will tell you how it is made!"

He said: "My mother?!"

Ben Sira explained: "When your mother, the Queen of Sheba, came² with an offering, to hear the wisdom of Solomon, he saw that she was beautiful. And he wanted to have sex with her. But he found her full of hair, and at that time, no daughter of Israel had hair under her garments. So Solomon commanded his servants: 'Bring me lime and arsenic!' They took the lime and sifted it in a sieve and ground the arsenic and mixed them together. They did this, so that when he looked at your mother --her skin smooth and the hair dropped off-- he did with her as he wanted. At once, she opened her mouth and said: "I didn't believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw and, behold, the half of it was not told me. You have surpassed in wisdom and goodness the renown that I heard" (1 Kings 10:7).³

²The phrasing here seems to be making a pun on the name "Sheba" and someone who is "coming" ("she-ba-al").

³This text turns the queen's lofty words of praise to God into the double-entendre punchline to a dirty joke.

Immediately, the king asked Ben Sira: "Who told you this?!"

He said to him: "I know myself because I am a prophet and the son of a prophet."⁴

The Text (Manuscript B)

Nebuchadnezzar asked Ben Sira: "This hare; how was its head made smooth of hair?"

He answered: "Like a miracle⁵ of lime!"

Nebuchadnezzar said: "How do they make this 'miracle of lime' of which you speak?"

Ben Sira explained: "The miracle of lime is with arsenic. There you have the miracle of lime. But if you want, ask your mother and she will tell you how they make it."

The king asked: "How would she know that?"

He said: "Because, when your mother, the Queen of Sheba, came to Solomon the King, to see his wisdom -- straightaway when he wanted to have sex with her he found her totally covered with hair. And at that time, there was no man of Israel who was fully covered with hair, as it is written: "I am a smooth

⁴Albeit the bastard son (of an incestuous union). Here, Ben Sira continues to needle Nebuchadnezzar with a further gibe about the king's own illegitimate lineage as the product of a such an undignified illicit affair.

⁵The curious use of "nes" repeatedly might be evoking the "nissah"/test from the Tanakh text -- as the queen tests Solomon with riddles, the test she undergoes here is over whether her hairiness -- in other words, her maleness, is more than skin-deep.

man" (Gen 27:11).⁶ Immediately, Solomon, in his wisdom, told his servants: 'Go and bring me lime and arsenic.' At once, they brought it and sifted the lime in a sieve, and the arsenic was ground on a tile. And he mixed it and made from that a miracle of lime; he made it for your mother, the Queen of Sheba, and she gave herself a beauty bath, and all her hair was removed from her.⁷ At that moment, the Queen of Sheba declared: "I didn't believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw..." (1 Kings 10:7).

Nebuchadnezzar asked: "Who said this to you?!"

He answered: "I knew it myself, since I am a prophet."

⁶How Jacob --the definitive "man of Israel" --describes himself.

⁷This rendering finally finds some explicit sensuality amidst the far more unsavory description elsewhere here and in Ben Sira A and Targum Sheni.

The Story of the Queen of Sheba
A Yemenite Folk Tale by Saadiah ben Joseph¹

This 1702 Yemenite folk tale was republished, with annotations, in 1953 by Yehuda Leib Avida, an Eastern European-born rabbi, communal worker, and author, and President of the Israel Institute of Folklore and Ethnology. About the tale's original author, Saadiah ben Joseph (no apparent relation to his namesake, the Saadiah Gaon), much less is known. Avida speculates that he was not a particularly scholarly person, but then contradicts that, in a sense, by demonstrating in his notes the rich and clever catalogue of scriptural and rabbinic text allusions and quotations that seamlessly embellish the original text.

This version of the tale seems clearly informed by each of the previous accounts of the Queen of Sheba's encounter with Solomon, mixing together elements from Tanakh, Targum Sheni, Midrash Mishle, and Ben Sira, plus the oral tradition of the Jewish-Arabic world, along with taking a different tack from the Gemara's speculations about the story. It does borrow as well from several Muslim-Arabic versions, particularly in its portrayal of the Queen's demonic family roots. Yet, the rich overlay of Jewish text citations serves a constant reassertion of the Jewishness of this story.

Coming from Yemen, the area long-speculated to have once been the land of Sheba itself, this account conveys a strong sense of the queen as a

¹Avida, Yehuda, ed. "Ma'asseh Malkat Sh'va." In Cassuto, M.D., et al, eds. *Sefer Assaf*. Jerusalem, 1953; pp1-11.

home-town hero of sorts, wise and beautiful and a champion of the oppressed. Thus, somewhat unexpectedly, in many ways this pagan ruler comes off even better here than the king of Israel, particularly in the contrast in their styles of rule. Solomon's power is achieved, in great measure, through often terrifying and excessive shows of force, while the Queen of Sheba reigns with kindness and justice.

In casting the Queen of Sheba very much in positive light here, Saadia also serves to redeem a reputation tarnished elsewhere in Jewish tradition. Thus, while the story goes into great detail about her demonic origins, she is anything but the malevolent netherworld figure that other accounts have painted her to be. The aspersions had begun to be cast as early as the ninth century, in the Targum to Job. There, the text hints that the queen is Lilith in disguise, Adam's demon first wife, who, in verse 1:15, also joins in the torture of Job. The Zohar makes a more explicit connection, with two direct references. In Parashat Balak III, 194b, she is described as a foul and loathsome witch, whose riddles to Solomon include her probing him for information about the source of his power over the spirit world, which she intends to use for evil purposes. Hashmatot ha-zohar, a collection of Zoharic materials dealing with mitzvot, contains a discussion of aspects of the ritual of halitzah involving the removal of sandals, which leads to speculations about the animal-hoofed demon Queen of Sheba. One of her riddles to Solomon is simply asking him for a pair of sandals; his response—that she has no need for shoes, with her beastly feet—demonstrates

he is not fooled by her human guise.

Jewish folklore, meanwhile, took up further the link between the queen and the child-murdering succubus Lilith. A 1696 German story (written six years before Saadiah's Yemenite tale) describes Lilith posing as the queen to seduce an unsuspecting innkeeper with riches and sexual favors. When he tries to break free of the possession, she not only impoverishes him, but announces she will kill the children she had secretly borne him. Another tale of that period places the queen in a lake, drowning children whom she lures towards her by showing them a magical pipe that she was able to keep lit in the water.

In Saadiah's tale, the Queen of Sheba's riddle's and magical powers are not used with wicked intention. Nevertheless, her encounter with Solomon does, in a sense, come to a very bad end, with their assignation resulting in the conception of Nebuchadnezzar, the king who will vanquish the remnant of Solomon's kingdom. Yet, it is Solomon here rather than the queen who is clearly in the role of the seducer; the account gives no sign at all that she was scheming to bear a child by him. And so, responsibility for the genesis of Israel's destruction winds up being placed squarely on the shoulders of Solomon, not Sheba.

The Text

Part One

"The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame...and came to test him with

riddles²

The wise scholars said that this Queen of Sheba's mother came from the demons. She married the King of Sheba, and when he died, the sons of the tent-dwelling Arabs made her ruler over them, because they saw her wisdom and insight: that there was none in her time wiser than she.

Her father was one of the servants of the King of Sheba. The King of Sheba would ask riddles to all the nobles of the kingdom and gave them time. If anyone could not solve the riddle within the allotted time, the king took all his money, until all the nobles of his kingdom became poor.

After awhile, the King of Sheba asked this servant a certain riddle, and allotted him time, and he couldn't solve it. The king said to him: "I know that you have no money, but I don't want to kill you either. So you must do whatever I want of you. You are to go to a certain state,³ within a walking distance of three months. But one who rides the brood of the royal steed, bred of swift horses,⁴ can go the way in thirty days. If you can make that round trip, then you will be absolved of your obligation."

The servant said: "I will go."

The king gave him one of the brood of the swift horses, and fixed a thirty-

²From 1 Kings 10:1.

³Apparently, to act as emissary for dispatches that are mentioned later.

⁴Paraphrased from Esther 8:10, referring to the issuing forth of the king's countermanding edict.

day time limit for him --he would go for ten days, stay ten days, and return in ten days-- and so he did.

Along the way, he saw two snakes fighting, one white and one black. The black one was trying to kill the white one and almost overcame him, because he was dying of thirst. The white one reached the man, parched with thirst.⁵ And the man gave him water until the snake was quenched, and he went on his way.

Immediately, the two snakes rose up again to fight. The white one overcame the black one and killed it. Then, the servant arrived at his desired destination safely, and he gave papers to a certain minister of that particular state, who read them and presented them to his chief and said: "Everything that my lord, the king, commanded, I will do."

Immediately, he gave the servant answers to all his questions, and fulfilled his wishes and desires,⁶ and sent him to return, contented. He left that city and traveled for four days. At that moment, a man came, handsome in form and appearance,⁷ with splendor and majesty⁸ upon him, and with servants

⁵"*Hamono tzi-chey tza-ma*" from Isaiah 5:13, referring to the fate of the exiled people of Israel. "*Hamono*" seems an errant word here.

⁶The language here suggesting the conclusion of the biblical account, where Solomon fulfills all of Sheba's desires.

⁷The same words used to describe Joseph in Genesis 39:6.

⁸Phrase used to describe the king favored by God, in Psalm 21:6.

flanking him on his right and left.⁹

He grabbed the servant and said to him: "Don't leave here until you come and stay with me, and I will honor you and do kindness for you as you had done kindness for me, for you saved me from death."¹⁰

He said to him: "Who are you, my lord, that my soul is precious in your eyes,¹¹ that you honor me so?"

The man said: "Not now; I won't tell you my story unless you choose to come with me." So the servant went along, and entered his house.

All the people of the man's household came to greet him --the great and the small, women and children alike-- kissing him head to toe. He was astonished over all the honor they lavished on him.

The servant stayed for the night. The next day, he wanted to go, and so he explained to the master of the house that the king had fixed a limited time for him, and that only ten days remained, so there was a great urgency for him to return immediately.

He said to the servant: "Don't worry about this; for in a moment, I will lead you to the middle of the city, because we are a demon clan, and I am that very white snake that you found fighting with the black one. He was my servant, and

⁹2 Samuel 16:6 uses this phrase to describe Shimei being flanked by warriors in his confrontation with David.

¹⁰Phrase from Psalm 56:14, referring to David's rescue from Gath.

¹¹The statement that Saul makes to David in 1 Samuel 26:21.

wanted to kill me and ravage the people of my house. I went out to summon him, but he fled from me, and I only caught up with him where you found us. He almost overcame me and tried to kill me, if it weren't for you coming and giving me a little water, which strengthened my spirit. After that, I got up and killed him. And all of that goodness is due to you. If he had killed me, he would have returned to this place and destroyed it. We would not have been revived and lived, any of us, were it not for your hand. Now, don't be sorry, because we know everything that the king has done to you all, and about the riddles that he asked you and how he took your money.

"And so, I will marry you off to my sister; she is a young virgin, so beautiful that there are none like her in the entire world, and great wisdom is within her. She will enrich you at once with her wisdom and counsel. And she will tell you every solution to the riddles that the king will ask you, and save each and every soul of the sons of your city from death, and from his taking their money. Also know this truly: your wife that you had when you departed there is dead."

When he heard that, he went ahead and married that maiden, and stayed with them for seven days of celebration. After seven days, they mounted the wife on the fleeing snake,¹² and he rode on his steed, and they gave him money and loads of clothing and different kinds of spices and gifts, and they went to accompany him, and in an instant he reached his city.

¹²Allusion to Isaiah 27:1, describing Leviathan.

Again, they told him: "Don't worry about a thing; we will not be far from you. We will come to you always to visit our sister. Anything that is too hard for you, we will do." They entered the house, but the servant could no longer see them—or his wife. He went before the king and bowed to him, his face to the ground, and gave him the dispatches. The king read them and was pleased with them, and commanded that the servant return home in peace.

The king sat on his throne; from time to time, he'd ask his riddles, and they would go to that servant, and he would ask his wife—and she'd tell the solutions to them. He would take from each minister according to his standing and generosity and each one was saved from the king's hand. The king was astonished by these things.

That woman became pregnant and gave birth to a girl, and there was none like her in the entire world. When she was seen by everyone, then all the people of the land learned he had a wife and it became known that she had come from the demons.

The daughter grew up, and when she was twelve years old, she pleased the king; she was more attractive and wiser than her mother and there was none as lovely as she in the entire world. She would even tell solutions to the riddles better than her mother; she would explain to those who came to ask her for a solution to the riddle: "It happens to be such and such." And she answered the

riddle, so that the king was astonished.¹³

Finally, he asked her father for her, and he married her and made her a lady. He placed a royal crown on her head and made her his lifetime queen,¹⁴ and all that he had, he gave to her hands.¹⁵ And her mother's people --her nation and her relatives and all the ministers who they governed-- came to visit her and ask after her welfare,¹⁶ and attended all her desires.¹⁷ After the death of her mother, all her family returned to her and she was sovereign and queen over them, just as her mother was to the children of men. And her fame and good character went forth to all the lands.

When her husband, the King of Sheba, died, she rose and took hold of his kingdom,¹⁸ and all the ministers and deputies bowed to her; she captured great fortified cities that her husband himself wasn't able to capture. And she captured them with little warfare, because the demons were aiding her.

Furthermore, among the birds over which she ruled was the hoopoe.

¹³Like her mother before, she is a kind of savior to those whom the king was trying to entrap by his riddles.

¹⁴The same language describing coronation of Esther in Esther 2:17.

¹⁵The same phrase used to describe Potiphar's entrusting Joseph, in Genesis 39:4.

¹⁶"*Bi-shlomah*" possibly punning on the name, Shlomo, foreshadowing the question we have about her and Shlomo.

¹⁷Another clear allusion to the conclusion of the Tanakh story; see note 5.

¹⁸This is in sharp contrast to Maharsha's commentary on Baba Batra 15b, where he asserts the queen was sovereign in her own right, and not through a royal marriage.

(Part Two of the story tells in some detail about a battle Solomon wages with an island king. Using language and imagery similar to Targum Sheni—including a portrayal of his dominion over the animal, bird, and spirit worlds—it describes Solomon learning that this pagan ruler has a beautiful daughter. So he sends a threatening dispatch to the king ordering him to give his daughter over, and also to submit to the rule of God and embrace Judaism. The king, however, is goaded into rebellion by one of his demon idols, which claims superior power. After a furious battle, the island kingdom is utterly destroyed, and all its people annihilated. The inciting demon is left suspended from an iron beam, on which is inscribed the Tetragrammaton. The king is executed and the daughter is taken by Solomon).

Part 3

When Solomon returned and made his assessment, he saw that the hoopoe had not come with him and had not gone to war. He sent for the ministers of the birds and their rulers, and said to them: "The hoopoe didn't come to the aid of God.¹⁹ So now go forth and bring their ruler and ministers to me to have revenge and to exact punishment over all the birds."

The hoopoes came to him, paying heed to his bidding, and they said: "Our lord king, and man of God, please, God forbid, do not think of us so, for we did not do this to rebel against your rule or your wisdom, or the gift that God

¹⁹Same phrase as in Deborah's song, Judges 5:23.

gave you by putting you in command over all His creations, greater and lesser. But we didn't hear your decree and your messenger had not reached us until now. There is this one woman, and her name is the Queen of Sheba; she rules over them since the death of her husband. She is wise, graceful, kind, knowledgeable and beautiful, and she judges us with righteousness and honesty, to do much goodness and justice for that land.²⁰ We serve in obedience to her not out of the dread of a king, but because she is kind to us, and we are like sons to her."

Immediately, the king, upon hearing their eloquent speech and good words, sent them on their way in peace.²¹

They returned, and told the Queen of Sheba everything that King Solomon did and about his greatness and his battles; and how he triumphed over the sea island king and queen and their god, and how he killed all the people of that island and destroyed it and burnt it with fire; and hung the demon in the very place where he was found, and he hangs there, still alive to this very day: "And he took pity on us and offered us a kind word, because we came before him, heartbroken, and 'a gentle word breaks bones.'²² Right away, he

²⁰The queen's rule is a kinder, gentler, perhaps more feminine kind of authority, in sharp contrast here to the harshness of Solomon's rule and judgment. In this version, the description of Sheba's bounty is wholly concentrated on her virtue, not the wealth of the land. And in response, she has earned the love, not just the fear, of her people.

²¹Her *chesed* already has a softening affect on him.

²²Quoting from Solomon himself, Proverbs 25:16.

commanded us to return to our home in peace."

When the Queen of Sheba heard all these things and all the stories of his acts, his assaults; his strength, and the account of Solomon's greatness,²³ fear of him overcame them. The hearts of the people fell and melted and turned into water.²⁴ She said: "I will go to him and I will hear his wisdom, right from his mouth, and I will see his deeds and the miracles and wonders that none among all men can do like him. As it is said: 'He was the wisest of all men, more than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalkol, and Darda the sons of Mahol,'²⁵ and as it is written, 'Solomon's kingdom was greater than the wisdom of all the Kedemites.'"²⁶

So she took one hundred twenty talents of pure gold and a great many spices and precious stones and almug wood,²⁷ and she went out to the king in Jerusalem and she came and tested him with riddles.²⁸

²³The same language describing Mordecai's triumph, Esther 10:2.

²⁴The same language describing the dismay of the Israelites after the battle of Ai, Joshua 7:5.

²⁵1 Kings 5:11.

²⁶1 Kings 5:10.

²⁷This is the same list of gifts the Tanakh version describes her giving him; plus the almug wood mentioned in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles as a gift from Hiram, in the verses often believed to have been errantly juxtaposed into the Sheba text.

²⁸In contrast to the Targum Sheni narrative, here the riddles come before Solomon's scheme to have the queen reveal her legs. This exchange of wisdom, then, is more particularly an aspect of the foreplay between the two.

She said to him: "What are these?: Seven go out and nine enter; two pour and one drinks?"²⁹

He said to her: "It is the words of women --that a woman chatters with her friend by moonlight^{30 31}-- with which you come to test me! Regardless, I will speak to you, so that you won't become arrogant and say of me, 'I asked King Solomon and he didn't answer me.' Did I not already say in my book: 'Answer a fool according to his folly, or else he'll be wise in his own eyes?'³² The seven that leave: the seven days of white.³³ The nine that enter: the nine months of pregnancy. After she gives birth, the two breasts pour forth for the child, and he drinks."³⁴

After that, she asked him: "A boy asked his mother: 'Who is my father?'

²⁹A very close paraphrase of the first riddle in the Midrash Mishle passage.

³⁰Language from Gemara, Berachot 3a.

³¹Solomon's reproach that such riddles are the stuff of idle women is not very fair or accurate, given that we have seen a king, earlier in the story, obsessed with riddles of the same sort, and given that Solomon uses a similar kind of game to get her to reveal her legs.

³²Proverbs 26:5.

³³During *niddah*, to look for remaining signs of menstrual blood.

³⁴Using different wording here than in the Midrash Mishle passage (which uses here the term "*dadim*" for breast, and which is otherwise nearly quoted verbatim), this version may be making a provocative pun, linking the words "*shad*"/"breast" and "*shed*"/"demon." Despite her demonic lineage, however, this story hardly portrays the queen as a Lilith-like malevolent demon. Nevertheless, in her transgressing of male authority merely by her position as sovereign (one with a hairy body, moreover) she is a powerful, and thus automatically dangerous, woman.

And she said to him: 'Your father is my father and your grandfather is my father.
You are my son and I am your sister.'³⁵

He said to her: "Certainly, these are Ammon and Moab, who came from
Lot, who sired them with his daughters."

After that, the queen took children, male and female, and dressed them in
similar garments and ornamented them with similar jewelry and said to him:
"Select for me the males from the females."

What did King Solomon do? He presented before them roasted grain and
nuts and gave it to them. The males took them by their hands and ran away with
them. The females placed them in their bosoms and came and went timidly. He
said to her: "These are the males, and these are the females."³⁶

She said to him: "Tell me, what is it: a copper cistern and an iron pail; it
raises up dust and offers water?"³⁷

He said to her: "A mascara tube."³⁸

³⁵This, too, is a nearly word-for-word paraphrase of the second Midrash Mishle
riddle.

³⁶The riddle itself is a paraphrase of the third Midrash Mishle riddle, but
Solomon's solution differs somewhat, here emphasizing the same contrast between
aggressive male and gentle female behavior that is demonstrated by Solomon's rule
compared to Sheba's rule in the hoopoes' remarks in the beginning of Part 3.

³⁷A paraphrase of the first riddle in Targum Sheri.

³⁸Each of these four riddles alludes to specifics of this version of the story. The
pregnancy riddle foreshadows her giving birth to Nebuchadnezzar. The Lot riddle
speaks to the unnatural nature of that offspring; that Solomon should sire the one who
will destroy his kingdom. The riddle of the disguised boys and girls suggests the
gender confusion involved with the queen and her male-like hairiness. And the

After she saw there was no end to his wisdom and his knowledge and reason, she admitted it to him, as it is said: "He responded to her every word; there was not a single thing hidden from the king that he did not answer her...And she said to the king: 'It is true, the report that I heard in my land about your acts and your wisdom, but I didn't believe until I came and my own eyes saw and behold, the half of it wasn't told me. Your wisdom and renown are even greater now in my eyes.'"³⁹

Right then, the king looked at her --saw that she was considerably beautiful and that she was unmarried-- and spoke with her. But when he heard that she was the daughter of a demon, he recognized that therefore her legs must be hairy. He thought: "How can I do it?"⁴⁰

Immediately, he made a place inlaid with marble stones; that was two hundred cubits wide by two hundred cubits. And he made an orchard on one side, and poured water on the marble, and it appeared as if the marble were water. He told her to pass to the one side to enter the orchard, and she did believe it was all water. At once, she lifted her garment and he saw her legs.

mascara box riddle hints at the queen's cosmetics preparation before sleeping with Solomon.

³⁹A not-entirely literal quotation of 2 Chronicles 9:2 and 9:5-6.

⁴⁰Earlier Muslim versions of the story and the Targum Sheni account alike do not discuss Solomon's motive for getting the queen to expose her legs: does he simply want to see (and have it be seen by his court) if the rumors about her are true, or is he interested in her sexually, too? Here, though, the text is explicit: Solomon wants to sleep with the queen, but (as in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, as well) wrestles with his distaste over the possibility she might be offensively hairy.

and they were hairy. So he sent her things with which women adorn themselves,⁴¹ and something that makes hair shed, and she covered herself with that. And she came to his place and slept with him.

And Nebuchadnezzar come from her,⁴² and this is as it is said: "Those who ravaged and ruined you shall issue forth from you."⁴³

And King Solomon gave her all that she desired --everything she asked for-- besides what he gave her from the king's bounty. And she turned and she went back to her land, she and her servants.⁴⁴

⁴¹So that she could reassert and confirm her femininity.

⁴²Taking here from the Alphabet of Ben Sira version of the tale.

⁴³Isaiah 49:17, but quoted out of context here to very different effect. The prophet meant "ye-tze-oo" in a promising sense, regarding Israel's enemies --"they will depart from you", rather than the threatening sense here, that Solomon, through his entanglements with foreign women, like the Queen of Sheba, is literally sowing the seed of his nation's destruction, a theme in keeping with the critical final chapters of his life recorded in 1 Kings.

⁴⁴Close paraphrase to final verse of Tanakh version.

Solomon and Balkis: An Arabian Tale
an adaptation by Chaim Nachman Bialik¹

Among his final works, Bialik wrote a series of stories about King David and Solomon, based on retold legends and ostensibly for children, which were gathered in a collection published four months after his death in 1934, Vay'hi Hayom ["And It Came to Pass"]. He used various Hebrew and Arabic sources for these adaptations, for the latter relying on both oral versions and Hebrew-language translations. The collection features two separate accounts of Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba, the first an only slightly simplified reworking of his and Ravnitzky's rendering in Sefer Ha-Aggadah, which itself is a fairly close modern Hebrew translation of the Targum Sheni tale. The second, translated here, is his interpretation of the Arabic legends about the king and queen, relying particularly on an eleventh century anthology called the "Ara-is," by Ahmad ben Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Nisaburi, known as al-Tha'labi.

Bialik remains true here to many of the details and much of the storyline of al-Tha'labi's compilation, and for a version supposedly geared to young readers, he doesn't skimp on the sexual innuendo that lies simmering not very deep beneath the surface of the text. But whatever passions of the heart and loins impel this king and queen towards their encounter, Bialik's story reflects the outward motivation driving the Arabic narratives, from the Koran on; the bringing of a pagan defender of her faith towards the knowledge of, and submission to,

¹Bialik, Chaim N. Vay'hi Hayom. Tel Aviv. D'vir Co, Ltd., 1964; pp129-143.

the true God. Any suspicions of rumors, then, about the queen's demonic lineage are played down here, much less significant to the story according to Muslim interpretation, only a digression and distraction for a tale that is more about religious conversion than gender politics.

Above all, however, Bialik seems devoted to telling a good yarn, and seems particularly to delight in the merging of Jewish and Arabic themes, imagery, and tones. Thus, this account luxuriates in the exoticism and intrigue of the mysterious East, with its colorful descriptions of magic carpet rides to far realms; of desert journeys and magical oases; and of caravans crossing the sands, laden with strange and sumptuous gifts. The hoopoe, a creature so significant in Islamic tradition that it is one of only four species protected by the word of the prophet Mohammed, is given great attention in this interpretation, in keeping with other Muslim versions of the story. There is the same strong focus as well on the Queen of Sheba's majestic throne, representing throughout the Arabic tales pagan temptation and authority to be subsumed by God's supremacy.

Yet, however much this tale seems pulled out of the annals of the Arabian Nights, at its center remains a King Solomon entirely consistent with Jewish tradition and legend: a riddle-solving man of great wisdom; an awesome ruler with almost supernatural powers, able to communicate with the birds and beasts and holding dominion over the spirit realms; a religious leader who (though his temple itself remains decisively offstage here) takes on as his mission

demonstrating the majesty and dominance of God to the world. And a ladies' man, whose interest in foreign conquests of the passionate sort brings alien women to Israel, where intrigues and clashes both religious and profane are played out in the halls and chambers of his royal palace.

The Text

Part One:

The Arabs tell of Solomon in these words, saying:

It happened after the prophet of God² --Solomon, son of David, may he rest in peace-- built the temple, he had the craving to roam and wander about the earth. So he got up and sat upon a flying carpet, and took with him human attendants and demons and spirits, and an assortment of beasts and birds,³ a very massive encampment --the legion was a hundred parasangs⁴ long. He commanded the light wind, and it carried them, the birds flying alongside in service to them along the way.

The hoopoe went out among the birds also, to survey for the entourage

²Along with evoking the Muslim source of this tale, giving Solomon the title "prophet" also underscores his role in this version: not to display wisdom for its own sake, but, most pointedly, to bring the knowledge of God to the queen and land of Sheba.

³The description mixes both an "Arabian Nights" and Noah's Ark flavor to the encampment, to be joined in part two by language evoking Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness.

⁴400 miles.

for a place with water in the wilderness, because she had the eyes to see water in the belly of the ground, like a man looks through glass.

Whenever the entourage would set down camp in a spot, a retinue of winged creatures would rise up and hover over the head of Solomon and his people to shade them with their wings from the blazing sun. The hoopoe went out to search for water, and, when she found it, would come and tell Solomon. Thus was her custom all the days of the journey.

Finally, the king came to his destination: to the land of Yemen.⁵ He saw there a land pure and beautiful, a land lush with every plant. And the place was good in his eyes. So at noon, he and his whole encampment descended and camped on the green grass.

But there was no water nearby in that place. So the hoopoe said to herself: "Before the king and his camp pitch their tents, I'll fly and find water and return.

So she spread her wings and lifted skyward. She gazed around here and there and looked --and there was a green garden below! So she glided there and dropped down to the garden, among the vegetation, and came upon another hoopoe, a native daughter of that land.

For a moment, the two winged creatures remained, staring silent in wonderment, sister to sister. And after that, the Yemenite hoopoe opened her

⁵In the Arabic tradition, Solomon's travel takes him first to Mecca, where he and his legions of spirits help build the kaaba; and it is from Islam's holiest site that he journeys on to Yemen, as we have here.

mouth and asked the foreigner: "What is your name, my friend; from where do you come and where do you go?"

Solomon's hoopoe answered: "I am Yapurah,⁶ and I come from the camp of Solomon, son of David."

The Yemenite asked: "Who is Solomon, son of David?"

Yapurah answered: "Indeed, this is Solomon, the ruler over men, over demons and over spirits, over beasts and over birds. He rules over dry land and sea, the four winds of the sky. And you, my sister, who are you and what is your name?"

The Yemenite answered: "I am Afayrah,⁷ and I am a daughter of these realms."

Yapurah asked: "And who is their king?"

Afayrah answered: "Balkis is her name.⁸ And if the realm of your lord the

⁶Both names are variants of the Hebrew word "afar"/"dust." For these creatures of the sky to have "dust"-like names suggests the same kind of inversion of expectations as the Queen of Sheba demonstrating male-like sovereignty and wisdom (and hairy legs too).

⁷The twin nature of these two hoopoes, down even to their similar names, suggests a natural matching association between their two lands and two rulers, and perhaps a shared destiny as well.

⁸While the queen is not named in the Koran account of the name, "Balkis" is the name that appears throughout later Islamic tradition. The meaning of the name is uncertain; it's not an Arabic word. Several sources suspect it is a derivation of the Hebrew "pilegesh"/"concubine" (by way of the Greek word "pallakis"), while others speculate the name may be a variation of Josephus' name for the queen, "Nikaulis." Al-Tha'labi mentions that she was sometimes known also as "Bal'amah," a feminization of the name Balaam, another biblical foreigner who came to know the supremacy of the One God.

king is great and vast, so too her realm is no smaller than his. All the land of Yemen is hers, and her army is big and very mighty. She has twelve thousand chiefs, with a hundred thousand-man force for each chief. Will you go with me to see her realm?"

Yapurah answered: "I'm afraid, lest I be late and the king will be angry with me. Because he'll ask for water, and won't find any."

The Yemenite hoopoe said to her: "Don't be afraid. Surely, your lord will also be happy by your bringing him report of this queen and her land."

So Yapurah went, sailing behind the Yemenite hoopoe, and came to the realm of Balkis.⁹

Part Two:

When Solomon and his men had finished pitching their tents, it was time for the Mincha prayer. Solomon sought water to wash his palms, and he couldn't find it. Moreover, the people and the animals that were with Solomon thirsted greatly. And there was a great cry in the encampment.¹⁰ The king lifted his eyes to the birds that were above his head, and a breach had developed in the formation, because the hoopoe was missing from her place. The king called to the chief of

⁹The Arab legends continue discussing the queen's lineage, and how she came to rule Sheba. In these accounts, she had defeated a male claimant to the throne, by marrying him and getting him drunk and cutting off his head on their wedding night.

¹⁰The language here evoking the mood and imagery of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness.

the birds—that is, the eagle—and asked him about the hoopoe.

The eagle replied: "May God answer, for I don't know at all where she went or where she is. I didn't send her anywhere."

The king was very angry and said: "As God lives, I will surely punish her, even slaughter her, if she does not prove her innocence to me."

He called for the osprey and said to him: "Bring me the hoopoe at once. The osprey rose skyward and saw the entire land all around, like a man looking in a bowl before him. He continued looking here and there: and there was the hoopoe, coming from the direction of Yemen! He pounced at her to seize her. But the hoopoe begged him and said: "I implore you, by God, who made you so much stronger than I that you could hurt me and do great harm to me!"

The osprey relented and said: "Alas for you; your mother is going to lose her child! For the king is angry at you, and has sworn to punish you, even slaughter you!"

The two flew, bound for Solomon. And when they came upon the birds, the eagle and all the winged creatures met them and said to the hoopoe: "Where were you?!" They told her that the king swore, in his fury, to punish her—a very cruel punishment.

The hoopoe trembled greatly and said: "This is the evil decree upon me, from the prophet of God?!"

They explained: "So said the prophet of God: '...if she can't prove her innocence before me.'"

The hoopoe shouted: "If so, I'm saved!"

The two of them went down --the osprey and the hoopoe-- to Solomon. He was sitting on the throne and the osprey said: "Behold, I brought her before you, prophet of God."

The hoopoe approached, and she was fearful and trembled greatly; her head was bent, tail lowered, wings sprawled on the ground. She stood, disgraced and shamed.¹¹ King Solomon grabbed her by the forelock of her head, and pulled her to him, and said: "Where were you?! Tell me, or I'll execute you at once."

The hoopoe said to him: "Alas, prophet of God. Remember you stand before God, the Mighty and High!"

When the king heard these words, his anger poured forth, and he said: "Tell me where you were and why you were late to return."

"Prophet of God, I indeed went out to look for water. And when I lifted up to fly, a new realm was revealed to me that I didn't know.¹² It is the land of Sheba. I thought: 'I will go there to survey it and investigate it and whatever becomes known to me, I'll tell my lord.' And this is what I found: a land, great and expansive and blessed by God; it lacks nothing, and a woman rules it --her throne is very wonderful. But the queen of the realm and her people do not

¹¹The same subjugation that he may at first be seeking from the Queen of Sheba. But he will find her to be far more of an equal, and though she defers to him and accepts his God, she is not brought to shame or reproof before him.

¹²She cryptically neglects to tell Solomon about meeting her sister hoopoe.

know God. They bow down to the sun, as it rises and sets. That is what I heard and saw, and now I tell it to my lord, king."

Solomon said: "I'll see if the words from your mouth are true, or if you spoke lies to me."

So, he commanded that a letter be sent to the Queen of Sheba. Meanwhile, the hoopoe went out, searching here and there on behalf of Solomon's people for a source of water, which she found in the ground in the valley. The demons and spirits dug in the valley, and exposed the water. Man and beast drank and slaked their thirst.

The king's scribe finished writing the letter, and these are its words:

"From the servant of God, Solomon, son of David, to Balkis, Queen of Sheba!

In the name of the merciful God, peace to the ones who walk with purity:

It is commanded by my mouth: that you come --all of you-- before me and give honor to God."¹³

Solomon scented the letter with musk,¹⁴ sealed the letter with his stamp, put it in the mouth of the hoopoe, and said: "Fly and carry the letter to the Queen of Sheba, and when you place the letter in her hand, remain at her side and stand there, listening to what she and her people say, and bring their words

¹³These words are calm and lacking both in the fury of his outburst to the hoopoe and the fire and brimstone of his threats in Targum Sheni.

¹⁴An erotic touch for a letter supposedly focusing on spiritual matters.

to me."

The hoopoe said: "Whatever the king commands, so I will do."

Part Three:

The hoopoe took the letter and flew along the way for three days; she came at morning time and landed on the roof of the palace of the queen. The palace was still closed shut, because the queen had not yet woken from her sleep. In the queen's bedchamber was a window set into the roof, opening skyward opposite her bed, so when the sun rose, its brightness broke through the skylight and fell on the queen's face, and she would wake and worship the sun. So was the manner of the queen every morning. The hoopoe came and spread out her wings over the top of the skylight, as the queen lay underneath in a bed of ivory and carpets of silk, her eyelids clutched in the light sleep of morning and her face upwards. The sun rose, but the queen didn't know. The hoopoe cast off the letter from her mouth, and it fell on the queen's neck. Balkis trembled and awoke, and opened the letter. She smelled its pleasant scent, and when she saw the writing on it and the stamp of King Solomon, she shuddered,¹⁵ and her head was lowered to the ground, and she said: "Surely, the king for whom the bird of the sky is his messenger --very mighty and strong is he! And his kingdom

¹⁵This passage is clearly loaded with the language and imagery of seduction: the sensual description of Balkis lying prone in her bed, enveloped by the hoopoe's wings (this also may be evoking "Leda and the Swan" Greek mythology imagery); the letter from the bird's mouth fluttering down onto her supine neck; her taking in Solomon's musky scent and her orgasmic shudders and trembling.

is greater than mine."

The hoopoe remained at her side, standing opposite to see what would happen. The queen rose and sat on her royal throne, and urgently summoned her wisest ministers to her to consult with them. The rule of the queen was to speak to her ministers from behind a veil, but when something grieved her spirit, she would reveal her face to them. So it was when the ministers came: she revealed her face and told them everything in the letter, and said: "Alas, my ministers and chosen ones! Consult with me now and conceive some advice for what I should do, for I won't decide anything until you have designated it for me."

The ministers answered her, saying: "We have the courage and strength for war, but that is for you to command. Command it, and there won't be a man who would disobey your word."

Balkis said: "This is the advice I advise¹⁶: Behold, I will send by the hand of my messenger an offering to Solomon. If he is a king --he will take the offering and leave us alone. But, if he is a prophet --he will scorn our offering and won't desist against us until we come before him to declare the name of his God."

The advice of the queen seemed good in the eyes of the ministers, and

¹⁶This sovereign queen is offering "advice" to her ministers?! One wonders if this is her customary method of rule in her precarious position as a woman of power: to act in a feminine indecisive and subservient manner, deferring to her male advisors (who put forth a typically male-aggressive --and inappropriate-- solution) before modestly offering a female-conciliatory plan --the clearly superior solution-- that she must have intended all along.

they said: "Do as you said, and you will live as queen forever!"

Then Balkis chose five hundred young men and five hundred young women. She dressed the young women in male garb, with overcoats and sashes, and the young men she dressed in women's skirts and put golden bracelets on their arms and golden chains on their necks and nose rings and earrings set with precious stones in their ears.¹⁷ She mounted the girls on horses and the boys were made to ride on camels,¹⁸ golden saddles on the horses and golden pillows on the camel, all of them set with precious stones and covered in embroidery. She gave the boys and girls five hundred bricks of pure silver and five hundred bricks of pure gold, and a big golden crown, all of it overlaid in pearls and opals, to bring to Solomon. Also, musk and amber and aloe-wood and ebony-wood she sent by their hands as an offering to Solomon. She took a chest and placed in it a flawless pearl that had no hole in it --very precious-- and a shell with a crooked piercing,¹⁹ and put them in the chest and shut it. And she gave the whole thing to the hands of her great and honored

¹⁷This is a merging of the Targum Sheni and Midrash Mishle traditions, with a new element as well, combining Targum Sheni's description of the queen's gift (no riddles attached) of the six thousand identical boys and girls, with the Midrash Mishle challenge to Solomon to distinguish between the males and females. Here, however, the young people are cross-dressed, rather than similarly dressed, and this image of females taking a male veneer (and vice versa) is an especially keen parallel to the queen's own situation, taking on a traditionally masculine role as sovereign of her-land.

¹⁸These riding assignments, as well, being a gender reversal.

¹⁹The genitalia imagery --a box containing a precious pearl and shell with talk of piercing-- is hard to ignore.

minsters --men of understanding and good sense-- to bring to Solomon.

And she sent a letter to him by the hand of her messengers, saying:

"If you are a prophet of God, then distinguish now between the young men and young women, and tell what is in the chest before you open it.

Then punch a straight and even hole in the pearl, and take a thread through the hole of the shell --but using no hand from man and no hand from demons."

Balkis commanded the young men and women saying: "When you speak to King Solomon, change your voices. The boys will speak in a fine and soft voice, like the voice of women, and the girls in a strong and coarse voice, like the voice of men."

She commanded the leader of the young people, saying: "When you come before Solomon, observe him, and if he sets his eyes on you in fury, don't be tense or terrified, for he is only a king, and I am stronger than he. But if the man is pleasant-seeming, with a good heart, know that his is a prophet of God, and honor him."

The people took the offering and all the property that was to be carried on foot, and they went.

Part Four:

The hoopoe knew all of this, and returned and told these things to Solomon.

Before the messengers of Balkis came, Solomon commanded his artisans to

prepare for him a great many silver bricks and gold bricks. The paved a road with bricks nine parasangs²⁰ leading from the king's residence beyond; that is the road on which the messengers of Balkis came to appear before Solomon.²¹ The king again gave the order, and they raised two tall golden walls along the sides of the road. When the work was completed, the king said to his wise men: "What is the most beautiful horse that you have seen, on dry land or sea?"

They said to him: "Oh, prophet of God! Behold, we have seen on such-and-such sea, a horse of many colors, and he had wings and a crest and a hairy mane on his head."

Solomon said: "Bring him to me at once."

They brought him the horse, and he said: "Tie him to the entrance of the paved road on the right, and give him feed."

The servants of Solomon did so. After that, Solomon sat on his throne. He ordered that four thousand chairs be placed to his right, and that same number to his left. He commanded the demons and spirits, and they stood in one line on one side of the road and one line on the other side, the parasang's length between the two sides of the pavement. And after them, the people were stationed, and after them, the beasts, reptiles, and birds, all of them two-by-two in lines on the right and left of the pavement, the line the length of a parasang.

²⁰36 miles.

²¹In the Arabic versions, strange and wonderful sea creatures are set upon the gold and silver bricks.

The great preparations were finished, and all of them stood, each man at his spot, and they waited for the messengers from Sheba to come.

Part Five:

So it was, when the messengers approached near, coming to the starting point of the paved road, and they saw Solomon's abundance and his enormous army, they fell down exceedingly, and did not have the courage to rise. But they lifted their eyes and looked: and there was the wondrous horse --they had never before seen anything like it-- standing at the entrance of the road, tied to a silver column with gold and blue bonds. It was defecating on the gold and silver bricks that were on the pavement. The tribute they carried now seemed cheap in their opinion, and they threw all the queen's offerings to the ground and went ahead empty-handed. They came between the walls, and passed in the middle, between the lines. When they saw the retinue of demons and spirits, they were terribly horrified, and their eyes popped out of their sockets. And, suddenly, a voice in their ears said: "Pass; don't fear!"

So they passed between the demons and the spirits and the people, the beasts and the reptiles and the birds, until they came before Solomon. They went up to him, and his radiant face shined, and he said: "What are you after?"

The head of the messengers bowed to the ground before the king and answered: "It is a gift extended to our lord the king, from our lady, the Queen of Sheba. May what I give be acceptable to you."

He gave the queen's letter to Solomon, and after he read the letter, the king asked: "And where is the chest?"

They brought in the chest, and Solomon took it, and shook it back and forth, and brought it to his ear. Then, an angel of God came and whispered in Solomon's ear, telling him what was in the chest. And Solomon said: "Behold! In the chest, there is a flawless pearl that is not pierced, and a shell pierced crookedly."

The head of the messengers said: "True! But can you also pierce the pearl and pass a thread through the shell's hole, with no hands?"

The king lifted the pearl, casting his upturned eyes upon it, and asked: "Who can pierce it with no hands?"

He asked the people and the demons, but they didn't know. So he asked the spirits, and they told him: "The earthworm can pierce it."

So they brought the earthworm, and it took a fine hair by its mouth, and went inside the pearl from one end and came out the other end. Solomon saw the beauty of his work, and he praised it, saying: "You pierced it, so I will give you your payment, earthworm."

The earthworm answered: "Please decree that the tree will live for me all my days."

Solomon answered: "Your request will be granted you."

After that, the king took the shell and said: "Who can pass a thread through this hole, with no hand?"

The white worm answered, saying: "I will pass it through, prophet of God."

The worm took the thread in its mouth and crawled, passing through the crooked hole that was in the shell, and came out the other side. The king said to her: "Ask me what I should give you as your payment."

The worm answered: "Please decree that the fruit of the tree will be for me all the days of my life."

The king said: "As you requested, it will be done."

After that, King Solomon distinguished between the young men and the young women. He did it wisely, instructing that water be brought before them for washing. For a young woman draws water from a vessel with one hand, and pours it on the other hand, and after that washes her face, according to the custom of girls. While a young man takes water from the vessel by his two hands and rinses his face. And that was how Solomon distinguished between them.

Then Solomon returned all the gifts that the messengers brought to him, and said to them: "You mean to buy off my heart with gifts from the hand of man? I have much through the mercy of God; what can you possibly add to that with what you give me? He also gave me wealth and glory and a kingdom, and gave me rule over all the earth. And all that is little in His eye, for He also bestows on me His kindness and courage, wisdom and prophesy. Now, return to your land and to your brothers, and say to them --" So says Solomon: Hurry

and come, all of you, to find shelter under the wing²² of the true God.' And if you do not come, I will send all my battalions against you and annihilate you from the face of the earth --no man will remain standing."

The messengers left Solomon's presence, and returned to their land. They came and told Balkis all of Solomon's words, and about all his splendor and greatness. The queen listened and said: "I will swear an oath to God; for this man, he is not merely a king, he is also a prophet of God, and we cannot prevail over him."

She sent a dispatch to Solomon, saying: "I heard your words, and moreover, behold! --I and my ministers are coming to you in order to be shown your great power, and to be shown who is the One --this God-- who gives you that power."

Before she departed, she gave an order, and they put her great and magnificent throne in an inner chamber behind seven citadels. She shut all the gates and placed guards over them, to guard diligently the throne and the gates, in order to conceal it. And she commanded her deputy, who substituted for her during the days of her departure, saying: "You have command over all the palace environs and over my royal throne. Do not give any man access to the throne to see it, or I will take your life."

²²This language of enveloping divine protection hearkens back to the bedchamber scene in part three, where it is the hoopoe's wings, in very sensual imagery, enveloping the queen. In a different sense, there, too, is a kind of Godly protection: wings shielding her from the sun which she worships falsely, beginning her break from the false gods toward discernment of the true God.

A herald went out, in the name of the queen, and he announced from the gates word of her journey. A throng of people came to send her on the way and to bless her. The queen took with her twelve thousand of her army chiefs, and one hundred thousand --a hundred thousand!-- army troops per each chief she took with her also. And she went on the way.²³

Part Six:

Solomon's court feared him greatly, and not a man among his ministers would raise even his arm or leg without the word of the king. So it was, Solomon was sitting on his royal throne, and he lifted his eyes and looked --and there was a cloud of dust coming, approaching before him! He asked: "What is that?"

His servants answered: "Balkis and her retinue, prophet of God."

He said: "Are they camping in this place to draw near to us?"

They said: "As you say, King."

The King approached his battalions and said: "Chosen ones of God, sons of the army! Who will go from here to Sheba and bring me the throne of Balkis before she and her people come to me, in submission to God."

One of the demons answered: "I will go, and even before you can get up from the throne you sit on when judging the people, I will bring the Balkis' own throne right here and present it to you. Trust me, king, for I have great strength

²³A rather fortified retinue for a journey of supplication!

to carry it."²⁴

Solomon said: "No, a lighter and swifter man than you must bring it."

One of the disciples of God answered --his name was Asaf²⁵-- and he said: "Lift your eyes, king, and see all of their plenty--"

The king looked up, and he saw before him the very land of Yemen. Asaf fell, his face on the ground, and cried: "In the name of God, the exceedingly Mighty One!"

God sent His angels to carry her throne under the earth in tunnels that they dug.²⁶ Suddenly, the earth split open wide, and the throne came forth and rose before Solomon.

Solomon saw it and said: "Who can recount God's might! This nothing but God testing my heart, to see I would recognize His kindness toward me or not."

He said to his servants: "Now, hurry and change the appearance of the throne. Add to it and take away from it, and alter its sections --turn it upside

²⁴Much is made of Balkis' throne in the various Arabic versions of the tale. Bialik's rendering stays close to al-Tha'labi's account of Solomon's theft and alteration of the royal seat as a means of testing the queen (while omitting al-Tha'labi's prolonged description of the throne) and intimating usurpation of her authority. That itself represents a difference from the Koran version. There, the queen herself sends the throne as a gift to Solomon, as an implied invitation to him to take up her idolatrous practices. Solomon's transformation of the seat then confirms his refusal to accept and his insistence that *she* be the one to submit.

²⁵The name meaning "he gathered."

²⁶God's direct hand in delivering Balkis' throne to Solomon demonstrates the Divine intention that Solomon be sovereign over all the earthly rulers.

down so that the upper parts will be the lower and vice versa, so that when Balkis comes here, you will test her, if she'll recognize her throne or not."²⁷

Solomon commanded this in order to test her wisdom and her good sense.²⁸ The artists did according to Solomon's word.

Solomon summoned the spirits, and they erected a palace for him, all of it floored with glass, water flowing beneath the floor and fish swimming in the water. Solomon came and sat on his throne inside the glass palace.

And so Balkis came, and Solomon's people showed her the throne and asked her: "Is this like your throne?"

She answered: "It is like it." The queen was cautious about answering. She neither confirmed nor denied it. All of them perceived her wisdom and her good sense. For she did recognize her throne, but she had sealed it in her palace behind seven gates, and she had taken the keys with her.

Solomon's servants brought Balkis to the glass²⁹ palace. She saw the water way and the fish swimming under the floor, and she presumed it was a river. She stripped off the fringe of her skirt to pass. And Solomon saw the

²⁷The test, in a larger sense, is whether Balkis will be so changed through her encounter with Solomon that she would not be able to return to her Sheban rule.

²⁸Al-Tha'labi explains that this test was in response to false accusations made by the demons of Solomon's court that the queen was weak-minded.

²⁹The glass reference hearkens back to the beginning of the tale, which describes the hoopoe's own ability to see underground water as easily as "a man looks through glass."

beauty of her flesh.³⁰ He turned his eyes from her and said: "Ah, it is a glass floor; there is no water here. Come, queen."

The queen came into the palace, and as she returned to her place, she said: Solomon, let me ask you something."

He said: "Ask me."

She said: "What bubbles and pours out like water, but is not from the earth or the sky?"

It was the rule of Solomon: when something came before him that he did not know, he would ask his people first if they knew. And if they didn't know, he would ask the demons, and if the demons didn't know, he'd ask the spirits. This one time, he asked the spirits first, in order not to delay his answer,³¹ and they

³⁰Bialik adheres more closely here to the Koranic rendering of the story than to al-Tha'labi's later version. Like many Jewish versions, beginning with Targum Sheni, the Koran includes a glass palace episode, but, just as Bialik has it here, without giving any additional information as to why Solomon is trying to get the queen to expose her legs. This leaves readers to surmise, perhaps, that he simply wants a more intimate peek at her body. Later Arab accounts pick up on the explanation offered in the Jewish texts (or perhaps being the source of this detail in those texts), that the queen was suspected of being a hairy-legged demon. Al-Tha'labi offers the consensus read of the various Arabic legends: that this semi-false rumor was spread by naysayers or demons in Solomon's court, worried about the religious and political implications if the king were to marry the foreign pagan queen. The demons feared that she would betray their secrets to Solomon, and they would then become subservient to Solomon and his descendants for all time. As that Arabic account continues, her legs are shown to be shapely and beautiful, very much a woman's legs, albeit indeed matted with hair. In an echo of the Alphabet of Ben Sira (or again, perhaps being its source on this matter), the hairy dilemma is solved with the use of depilatories.

³¹Interestingly, Solomon's wisdom, God-given or not, is not in evidence here; he neither solves this riddle himself, nor does he get the answer, as he did here before, through the intercession of God's angel. His haste to dazzle her with an answer almost seems to suggest that desire for her is overruling his own "*tuv sechel*."

said quietly: "Nothing is as easy as this: Make your horses labor --run them and fill your vessels with their sweat."

The king did so; he commanded that the mighty of his horses be made to run until sweat rose up on their flesh, like the white foam of soap. He drained the sweat, filling a mug, and approached the queen and said: "Here is the liquid that you said."³²

Balkis said: "Indeed, you found out my riddle."

She continued to test him with more riddles, and he answered all her questions with wisdom and reason. There wasn't a thing hidden from him. Balkis knew that he was a prophet of God,³³ and served him with all her soul and all her heart.

And Solomon made a covenant with her, and sent her to her land, with great honor.³⁴

³²Unpleasant as it is, there is a distinct sexual suggestiveness to this gameplaying with the lathered sweat of frothing robust steeds. The fact that this leads to more revealing riddles, posed and tackled, only turns up the heat.

³³Solomon's role in the queen's ultimate conversion is much more passive here than in the Arabic accounts, where he briskly and directly compels her to disavow her previous beliefs and swear submission to Allah.

³⁴The story winds down here in Bialik's telling just when it is getting good. The Arabic sources provides slightly more information, but that is varied and truncated itself. Al-Tha'labi's anthology offers a couple of alternative endings. By each account, Solomon desired the queen and wanted to marry her, but was put off by revulsion over the queen's hairy legs. Once this is resolved by her bathing and using a depilatory, he, in one variation, does wed her. But recognizing and respecting her royal responsibilities, he allows her to return to her realm, and, in a prefiguring of a modern commuter marriage, travels to her land monthly for three-day visits. Alternatively, he expresses his love for her by marrying her off to a King more local to her than he, a man of her own choosing, who Solomon then appoints to serve as her regent.

The Visit of the Queen of Sheba
by Yehuda Amichai¹

Amichai's poem appears in his second collection, *B'merchak Shtei Tikvot* ["Two Hopes Apart"], published in 1958. Although it is a relatively early work, it shows many of the features of his mature style: juxtaposing elegant lyricism with bracing modern jargon and linguistic innovations all his own; conceiving startling metaphors and sexual imagery that verge dangerously near the edge; and filtering characters and themes from Jewish tradition through the existential lens of contemporary experience. *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba* takes up a theme he has addressed elsewhere in his writing, the ephemeral nature of love and the poignant allure of unattainable and mysterious women.

Amichai is hardly the first modern poet to see the literary potential in the story of the queen and her encounter with Solomon. She has been a favorite of many writers, who seem as tantalized as the king by the combination of her exotic otherness, her unapologetic carnal appetites, and her willingness to venture out of traditional female spheres and assert herself in male circles of power. In that way, then, she becomes an ideal fantasy figure of sorts for smart and worldly mavericks, who hunger for a mate the intellectual and sexual equal of themselves, if only to enjoy a fling.

William Butler Yeats returned to the character several times. He devoted

¹Amichai, Yehuda. *Shirim*: 1948-1962. Tel Aviv: Hotza'at Schocken, 1977: pp134-143.

four poems that display a bittersweet longing for the fulfillment Solomon must have savored in finally finding a soulmate worthy of him, discovering that love is the culmination of wisdom. In "Solomon to Sheba," he writes:

Said Solomon to Sheba,
And kissed her Arab eyes,
'There's not a man or woman
Born under the skies
Dare match in learning with us two,
And all day long we have found
There's not a thing but love can make
The world a narrow pound.'

French author/politician Andre Malraux was so obsessed with the queen and her story that he sought to prove its historic veracity, setting out in 1934 on a audacious bush plane adventure that took him across Ethiopia and Arabia. His claims to have sighted the ruins of her capital city in southern Yemen made front-page headlines across the world, although follow-up archaeological evidence was never sufficient to confirm his findings. Malraux tackled the story in his writing, too, with his focus on the denouement, offering a portrait of Solomon so desolated by the departure of the queen that he can no longer rule, idling away the last, sad days of his life just standing impotently in the barren desert.

Senegalese poet (and onetime president of his country) Leopold Senghor composed an "Elegy for the Queen of Sheba." It is an epic post-colonial tribute that reclaims the Africanness of this character, celebrating the queen as a black heroine who luxuriates in her cultural heritage and will not temper her pride and identity in the face of Western power. But she is no mere political symbol,

representing a far more expansive study --in poetry, song, and love-- of the enduring proud allure of the African woman.

The cultural differences that come between Solomon and the queen inform Amichai's rendering as well. These are two characters isolated even in their own societies, who are drawn calamitously together across the religious and political divide. Both of them are not quite what they think themselves to be. The queen acts like a femme fatale, believing she is conjuring a sexy plot to entrap the king. Solomon is a seen-it-all man of the world, tired of empty sex, who imagines one good woman is all it will take to open his heart. But he winds up not so open as he hoped and she becomes somewhat more emotionally drawn than she had suspected. And punctuating the whole misbegotten encounter are Amichai's nagging images of Jewish tradition --tablets and arks and Haftarah cantillations-- that remind us of the unbridgeable gulf that separates these two, sending them back to their lonely lives, sadder... and maybe not any wiser.

The Text

1. Preparation for the Trip

Not resting, no--
restless as a half-hiss²--
the Queen of Sheba
rose from her lair, in the midst of her dusky spells,³
clapping hands.

²Literally a "sh'va na," a movable half-vowel, articulated with a partial breath. Amichai plays with the Hebrew homonyms "sh'va" and "Sh'va" ("Sheba").

³Amichai taps into some Jewish and Arabic traditions of the queen being a demonic, witch-like feral creature, even literally half-animal/half-human.

The servants fell on their backs,⁴
bats swapped places,
and already she was drawing in the sand
with her big toe
Solomon, as though he could be
like a toy ball, like
an old fish, like
a cloudy cloud, like
half-chicken, half-Solomon.⁵

The minister of ceremonies overdid it
with peacocks and chests.⁶
Later she'd puff out a bit
her collarbone,
so he could smell
the aroma of her heart.
Likewise, feathers brought in
to tickle his ear
and down by his belt.
Then, too, word stole up to her
of circumcision.⁷
All that she wanted to know,
her curiosity sprouted like leprosy.
Her unruly blood-sisters
screamed in an amplified way all through her body.

⁴Possibly a knowing word-play here alluding to Ben Sira and the Arabic traditions. "*M'shartim*" ("servants") can also mean "hair remover." Thus, in her preparations, the hairy queen is scheming to disguise her demonic nature.

⁵Possibly making fun of the Solomon of the legends, who ruled over the bird kingdom. Also alluding, perhaps, to his famous court proposal to divide the disputing mothers' baby in half.

⁶Making reference to all the folk tales describing the pomp and lavish gifts accompanying the journey, specifically the chest containing the shell and pearl, the queen's first riddle for Solomon in the Arabic tales, as retold by Bialik.

⁷The queen's obsession with circumcision is noted from time to time in earlier traditions of the tale —by some reckoning, it is a chief impetus in her journey to Jerusalem— and is hinted at in one of her riddles from Midrash Mishle.

The sky's buttons
were opened,⁸
Her inverted head
was slapped with mascara.⁹
All the brothels
of her passion
were lit in red.
In the factory
of her blood they worked
'til night came.
A grey night, like an old stick of furniture,
unremitting night
unremitting as a virgin forest.

2. The Ship Waits in the Harbor

A ship at night in the harbor,¹⁰
A ship, white, in shadow,

A ship bearing longings,
A portion contained, a portion chaotic,

A ship slippery and narrow,
A ship without subconscious,

Already fluttering between the masts,
the small veils of the queen,

Made with silk birds, which haven't
arrived at the northern land and haven't

Gone on to live through night.
On the surface, it's worthy

To wait for a white ship
cheek to cheek on the wharf and to wait

Between views of sand and views of waves
until morning... and beyond.

⁸Unzipped fly imagery here.

⁹A possible allusion to the queen's first riddle in Targum Sheni.

¹⁰The ship personifying her desires.

3. Morning of the Departure from Sheba

She called on her thighs to come back together,
knee-cheek to knee-cheek, her soul already
a zebra of moods, good and bad.
In an oven her body turned,
her heart on the spit. The morning shrieked.
A torrid rain poured.

The forecasters, bound in chains, divined.
Foremen of her sleep went out on spent camels.
Each minnow of laughter dashed
before the shark of her fury rose. Coral¹¹
weighing on her heart hid in her armpits,
and hints of night lizards appeared on her belly.

She sat on her bed, sharpening riddles and delights
like colored pencils. With beards
of old men they made her an African girdle.
her secrets stitched on scarves.

But lions still held the laws
like The Two Tablets above the Holy Arks
and the whole world.

4. The Journey on the Red Sea

Fish puffed along the sea,
the way of long anticipation. Skippers
navigated by the map of her craving, and her belly rings.
The nipples of her breasts preceded her like spies.
Her tresses whispered, one to the other, like knotty plotters.
In the corner of the deep, between the walls of the sea,
counting began, in silence.
In the ceaseless twitter of her blood sang
a lonely bird. Rules fell
right out of the science books. Clouds were shredded like contracts.
At noon, she dreamt of
sex in white snow, and yolky dreams,
and the pleasure of yellow wax. All the air thrust
to be breathed by her. The deck hands cried out
in the foreign tongue of fish.

¹¹An allusion here to the "almug"/"coralwood" that was part of the shipment from Hiram in 1 Kings 10:11 and 2 Chronicles 9:10.

But beneath the world, beneath the sea,
there was a cantillation like Haftarah:
everything sang to each other.

5. Solomon Waits

No rain ever,
No rain ever,
Always cloudy clouds,¹²
Always gruff love.

The shepherds of the wind returned
from the pasture,
In the world's courtyards
stone buds bloomed
hallowed to strange gods.
Shaky ladders dreamt about
the ones dreaming of them.¹³

But he
saw the world,
that the core of the world
was a little tattered.
And he awoke like sundry lit stables
in Megiddo.¹⁴

No rain ever,
No rain ever
Always gruff love
Always quarries.

6. The Queen Enters the Hall

Her blinding, nude bud¹⁵
doubled in the mirrored floor.¹⁶ All prudence

¹²Using the same language of the queen's conjuring of him, in the poem's first stanza.

¹³Alludes to the desert dream of Jacob/Israel.

¹⁴One of Solomon's chief urban building triumphs (1 Kings 9:15).

¹⁵The Hebrew playing with the genitalia implications of "vered"/"rose".

¹⁶Using the palace of mirrors motif seen throughout the Jewish (and Arabic) versions of the story, the device here is not to get the queen to expose her legs and

Was redundant. He perused her,
taking time sitting and assessing

her big butt, lying on the couch.
Then, he rolled up the map

Of his life --roaming and pursuing--
and he saw in the mirror body after body¹⁷

Above and below, like a poker
game. He hid his blood in a sack.

And his face changed seasons like an ongoing
landscape. He reached the end

Of his wits, then got a little wise.
And he knew the contour of her soul like the contours

Of her body: pliant, when he'd clutch it.
As the form of a violin, so the form of its case.

7. The Match of Questions and Riddles
In the ping-pong of questions and answers
no sound was heard,
except:

Ping-Pong--
and the entourage coughing
and the sharp rip of paper.

He made black breakers with his beard
so her words would drown in it.
She made her hair
into virgin forest, where he could go wrong.
Words set down clacking
like chessmen.
Their thoughts tall masts
passing by each other.

determine whether she is a demon, but simply to cop a peek; the hair that the king is
looking for is her pubic hair.

¹⁷Finding himself yet again in the seduction mode, Solomon also concedes to
himself a whole lifetime spent too much in pursuits of the flesh.

Empty crosswords were filled in
like star-filled skies.
Secret depots exposed,
buckles –and vows– undone.¹⁸
Heartless faiths
were tickled
and laughed, awefully.¹⁹
Her tongue fell on
his tongue, in the final game.
Explicit maps were spread out on the table.
Everything was revealed, and fierce.
No mercy.

8. The Empty Hall

None of the word games
were put back in boxes.
None of the boxes shut
after the game.

Sawdust of questions,
cracked husks of proverbs.
Wooly packing material
of brittle riddles.

Coarse wrapping paper
of love and intrigues.
Second-hand fairy tale morals
the chaff of reckoning.

Enduring obstacles
were rolled up on coils,
miracles returned to the cage.
Chessboard knights went back to the stable.

¹⁸The imagery here captures both the shallowness (the aimless wordsmanship of crossword puzzles) and the emotional depth (the more complex recesses of the soul stored in those secret depots) of the riddles and questions passing between the two, not to mention the clear function of these games as sexual foreplay.

¹⁹The religious division –what must force them apart, along with the political divide– gets touched on, perhaps, in the riddling, but only lightly, enough to recognize the explosiveness of the topic, before it is tabled in favor of the more immediate gratification still possible.

Empty boxes, saying:
"Caution, fragile!"
Empty crates
singing psalm tunes.

Then a grave parade, the King's corps came,²⁰
and she fled, lamenting,
like black snakes
in the withered grass.²¹

An atoning moon circled the towers
as on Yom Kippur eve.
Caravans, lacking camels and companions,²²
silently leaving... and leaving... and leaving.

²⁰Solomon is not merely sending the queen on her way, nor is she leaving on her own accord, as in the other versions. The parting is, to say the least, not amicable. There is no pact made, no gifts exchanged, certainly no lasting bond forged. This is a hasty, hostile expulsion, a one-night stand, where the king, when he's through ravishing the woman, hustles her by force not merely from his bed, but from sight of his kingdom.

²¹A possibly knowing allusion to the snakes of the Yemenite tale.

²²The queen departing ruefully and empty-handed, not just without lavish gifts; there is a strong sense here that she has been plundered, physically and emotionally.

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba A Personal Retelling

It's the gold that gets them first --even the fake stuff will dazzle them into submission if it is shiny enough-- and you have to wonder how an entire kingdom can be bought off so cheaply. One ingot becomes two in the first telling, and by the time the legends really start making the rounds, they've increased your holdings til your coffers overflow in their minds.

You learned long ago if you lead with the glitter, the allegiance follows in step. So you stretch what you actually have as far as it goes, use it to trim any object they'll connect to you. Including your own body, a festooned temple where they come to worship. The jewels are only the beginning. A rainbow of feathers sets off your pearl-laden neck, plumage that a frank dresser --if you could find one-- would say makes you look like some peculiar bird, a kaleidoscopic falcon. But from the cut of your dress, it is clear what kind of wild animal you mean for them to think you are. Only down below do things get more mysterious, skirts so voluminous it's no wonder they wonder what you conceal underneath.

A little revelation would answer a lot of questions. But any ruler relying on magnetism knows the rumors work to your advantage --keeps them guessing, on edge, in line. You know all the names they have for you, a catalogue of fears and rude honors: Demon. Jinni. Siren. Witch. Wraith. Liliith. Adventuress, Sorceress, Seductress --enough esses to add serpent to

the list. Outside your realm, they scour strange languages for new ways to call you whore. But words that don't make you sound too cheap, of course. You are, after all, no one's idea of a run-of-the-mill concubine.

In court, you show no signs of those pulsating demons (the real ones never do, they tell themselves). You are business-like, in a womanly fashion. Your word, as they say, is law; just be sure it is feminine tone. A passive voice is always appreciated; verbs of command are used sparingly. You advise your advisors (or rather, advice is given), even though their own advice rarely matches your good sense.

The wisdom they give you credit for is real --not borne of incantations or secrets murmured by demon cousins, but from a keen mind, the kind of education you can only get in a palace, and years and years of experience. You've learned over time to suffer the fools; developed a discerning ear for tuning out the sycophants (though the sycophants come in handy, too, on low days). And you know how to hold the loyalty of an uncommon counselor, the kind who actually gives you good counsel.

War is what's usually on their minds, far more than if it were a king they were counseling. They are ready at your non-command to send the legions to fight for your glory, to prove by dying that being ruled by a queen didn't make them any softer. You could stop that, plead a dainty hatred of bloodshed and be Mother Sheba sending her soldiers safely to bed thinking there is nobility, too, in soothing their sovereign's soft heart. But there's a cold logic to the occasional

for-the-hell-of-it war when you are a woman in charge in one of rougher parts of the world.

It is not until late at night --when the banquets are over, one more petition heard, the last papers signed-- and the attendants finally return to their quarters, that the posing is finished until morning. But however late, the moment always comes, every evening. You are in your bed chamber; your prayers to the moon have been completed, the feathered robes and jewels and mascara are off, and you look in the mirror once again at your naked self. The songs exaggerate, of course --your face alone will not launch any thousand ships (hers probably couldn't either)-- but royalty and wealth, good breeding and health have their privileges, and you could honestly be called a handsome woman. Not that you have anyone who can properly appreciate that reality. And so this room is always empty, a double-edged luxury for such a well-tended queen. Court is never in session here; it is not a place for servants or subjects, and you don't know anyone else.

So you lie there alone, and once more your thoughts, as they have, turn to someone some distance away, a man you've heard about, encased in as many legends as you.

You were not your father's first choice; that's a fact hard to overcome, even if you can have the official history play it down. They'll write that you shone like the sun, but sometimes you yourself aren't so

THE PLATE EDITION
OF THE HISTORY OF THE
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convinced you've been able to come out of David's long shadow. Looking around at what you have made your nation, you would think by now there isn't much left to prove. Yet it is hard to give up the habit of spending most of your career trying to show that becoming king wasn't a fluke—or at least was a fortunate one.

You could have an army of children by a thousand wives and concubines, but you will never escape being his son; your greatest feats still have his name stamped alongside. You built the Temple, but David built the city. You write songs in praise of women; he composed psalms in praise to God. You brought your people prosperity, the wealth of other nations, gold and silver and countless precious stones; he brought the enemy of your people down with a single stone. And the categories where you eclipse him are not the ones you want them to remember: he had only one Bathsheba; you, her true son, have many, enough to require a surplus palace or two.

What you have actually accomplished gets lost in the phony luster of the things they ascribe to you. Building that Temple with only human labor and devotion to God should have been impressive enough without them believing you enlisted one of those platoons of spirits they keep saying you rule. And using some mules to haul bricks up the mount or sending some messages by carrier pigeon doesn't mean you can talk to the beasts or command the entire animal kingdom.

And those riddles they always make you answer; if they keep saying you're so wise, why do they think it is angels who whisper the solutions in your ears? And don't they realize they keep posing the same questions over and over, however they change the words around? Every day there is a new baby to divide; every night another real flower to spot among the fakes.

Your reputation would be made by those two tricks alone. But they add to it by collecting your sayings like manna that feeds arid minds. Every quip you utter --no matter the cliché-- gets quoted. And the authorship of adages by anyone else in the land gets stripped away; it all winds up included in the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

Sometimes you picture them, imagining you in your overdecorated palace: halving another prostitute's kid; quoting yourself; singing your song of songs to those thousand concubines while they dance their reels and arabesques around you. One thousand overestimates by well more than nine hundred, but you do have a broad choice. And they'll surely dance for you; it's your command that starts them whirling. Each about as good as the next, and selecting one for the evening is a brief amusement. But as your eyes wander around the harem, your mind looks someplace else, conceiving another woman you're not sure where, one who dances her own seductive dance whether you order it or not, who knows that the puzzles you solve are easy, who brings new, tougher ones of her own.

Who is good for more than just the night.

###

If all you wanted was the answers to riddles, you could have sent a page to test him. Gifts could be dispatched by messenger. Even an entourage of nobles and eunuchs, bearing gold and greetings, could have been arranged, if you had simply wished to pay him tribute or make your presence known. But he is someone you have to meet yourself. And that takes a sojourn beyond your pale, into realms you have never explored.

For an efficient caravan, it is a trek of weeks, not months, hardly years -- what ruler could possibly leave her nation any longer? The anxiety of a people who don't even know a day's absence of their queen is what stretches the journey out in their mind. That and your own long nights of anticipation. And of wondering. And of realizing you have never even seen land that isn't yours. Suddenly, your castle, the highest of the high places, doesn't seem so lofty. It's the same view from behind any palace wall, a narrow panorama.

Now it is your travelling companions who have the superior wisdom: every step that is new to you is the same old course for any dumb camel trudging along. Your quest, your pilgrimage, your breathless odyssey -- the journey of a thousand and one legends -- takes a route already well-marked with their dung.

The guides keep their own company, noting the familiar wells, but you've brought along musicians, plus a storyteller or two to amuse you along the way. You didn't realize the heat, rhythmic enough to make the encircling dunes wave,

would be ample embellishment for your imagination. Between the troubadour tales and your own blurry vision, you have plenty of mirages conjured up in the sands around you. That's when each desert creature takes on new forms. Two puny snakes scuffling in the dust become serpents, then demons: rival brothers disputing a throne, or a witch's uncles fighting to the death. The animals that serve your procession take on their own, less fanciful new roles out here: the birdkeeper sends out regular flocks to scout by wing; you watch them soar ahead toward tiny oases that grounded eyes can't see.

The desert loses its allure awfully soon; by a few days out, you have seen quite enough of it. The landscape never changes; every well looks the same (only spread too far apart). A new, impossible riddle presents itself: try to distinguish all these different species of ugly little scrub bushes. Nothing is exciting from atop a spitting camel; the exquisite embroidered pillow you sit upon could use less embroidery and more stuffing.

Watching the trail of your treasure moving along with you, you begin to wish you had sent some of it ahead; all that gold and silver is weighing down the caravan, and for a moment you wonder what five hundred precious bricks would look like discarded by the side of the road. You could leave them next to the occasional ruins you pass: those scavengers' hovels, or perhaps what is left of some other king's invincible civilization. Did their cities fall when their reckless ruler thought to take leave for a desert jaunt? Or did the monuments simply crumble right on top of them?

7

The books and scrolls you are glad you brought; they help you compose the questions you mean to ask him. And they will be an uncommon addition to your offering: another kind of tribute, a different sort of spice, a preferable treasure for a king who is called so wise.

Word precedes her, by a week or two anyway. Time enough to prepare --and to worry, a little. You are used to receiving ambassadors, not their lieges. It isn't done; monarchs just don't drop in on each other, they don't go hanging around in other king's courts. Unless, of course, they are in chains. But this one is no war trophy. You may be the one she is taking the trouble to meet, but that advantage could fade like shadows in the glare; a memorable entrance alone might tilt the balance. And in an instant, her visit is less a tribute to you and more an advertisement of Sheba's supremacy.

Your people are even more uncertain what to expect than you, and you can feel the sheer intrigue about her starting to seduce the nation. The hypotheticals and speculations alone are a whole lot more interesting than the same old you. A fresh face on the royal scene --a woman's face-- just the thing to break them of their Solomon rut. Especially if her bearing is more regal, her body a purer temple, her wealth more dazzling. And maybe her gods are more alluring, too.

How does Jerusalem measure up to the place she travels from? You

can't trust the traders' words; they know you wouldn't want to hear if Sheban cities outshine the capital you spent a lifetime building. So from your palace you look uncertainly at the temple complex; you gaze upon those mighty works of yours, and for a moment, maybe, despair.

That's why you don't squelch those rumors about her; you even enlist the courtiers to help spread them. But by the time they make their way back to you again, you don't even recognize them, and, in your most uncertain moments, start believing some of them yourself. And then don't know what to make of the information (is a donkey-legged queen going to pose a bigger threat or not?) The wilder gossip is still easy to sift out: that she beheaded her husband to get his crown; that she reached the throne by burrowing under it, guided beneath the earth by her netherworld patrons; that she's just a man in disguise. But just how did she get to be queen anyway? And what, if not some malformation, could have kept her a virgin so long?

You also hear about what they are saying about you. The cynics call it more of your bread and circus; you've concocted this foreign queen's visit, a flashier kind of hippodrome spectacle. They know your way with women; they dread the comely black one (she must be black) distracting you like all the other ones do when they're new. They wonder if answering her piquant riddles will amuse you more than settling their disputes over sheep.

*She's bound to come with tests, as everyone else does. Travelling
across the Middle East like you're a sphinx to be outmatched. A
pilgrimage to Jerusalem to feast on you. And, yes, you'll want to show her
the Temple. Another disputation, just one religious leader to the other.
Plenty of time to argue God.*

###

You halt six hours outside the city, readying the processional. Two trumpeters are sent forward to the gates; no grubby bird will be announcing your approach. You have to show the man and his people that you are not some squalid band of nomads.

It is time to dress the little group you've brought along for display: the young dandies and the equestrians; a bearded dwarf, holding your mastiff, and other assorted grotesques; slave girls to shield you with parasols; and lapdogs, of both the human and canine variety.

For yourself, you select something in softer pastels than is your habit, to set off your black skin. But those same skirts, cascading to the floor, concealing your best riddle. A tall, starched turban makes its exotic point, and you have on just enough jewels to suggest how much more you own.

They open the gates for you; the ramparts fairly thronging. He doesn't greet you there; you didn't expect him to. A deputy is assigned for that, to invite you in and escort you to His Majesty. You wonder how far through the streets you'll have to parade before he presents himself. The palace is two parsangs;

he meets you halfway, literally.

Somewhat squatter than you imagined, and with a bit of a scowl. But that changes to a formal smile, and the voice is, well, pleasant.

You both size each other up, that's the first thing. You note at least three of your wives are more beautiful, two shapelier, one blacker. But none would return your look any steadier. Or speak with less timidity.

You take her --and the inevitable hangers on-- into the palace. The polished marble floor beneath your feet and hers gleams; if you peered very hard into it, you might catch a faint reflection upward. But no need for that to dispel those hoary allegations. Because there is a monkey, you see, that she brought along, part of her motley retinue, which lingers by her feet. Once or twice it lifts up her skirts just a little, showing a leg shapely enough. And no undue hair.

You know you are due some tribute, a royal dowry's worth of loot, and you have the same prepared for her. The trunks are carried in; hers you can already see bulge with Arabian herbs. Their scent mingles with the mimosa and lemon wafting from her body.

The spices and the silver, the gems and the jewels are brought out of your chests and his coffers --you both wind up getting what you give. That is no surprise. And you are less interested anyway in the expense than in a different kind of value, in finding out if he is worthy of what else you are ready to offer.

Her gifts are as good as yours --the first round is a draw; neither of

you has to say it. Of course, you have your whole palace and temple and city to impress her, the fancy feast with your gilded table settings and those cupbearers --they certainly trump her dusty little entourage-- and she speaks all the right flattery as you take her on a tour. When you think she wouldn't notice, you look for a sign in her eyes whether any of this really astounds.

He wants it made clear to you he is no mere figurehead. So he not only shows you around his capital; he explains its daily operation like a man whose hand is in everything. He is full of information: about the dimensions of the public places; about the corners of the kingdom where he gets his delicacies; about his slaves and his stables and his ministers; how the quarries are dug and how the corn is harvested. But not about his wives.

You try not to brag, though modesty isn't your suit either. But how can you talk of almug wood from Hiram, and gold from the mines of the East and everything else that went into building your buildings if it all looks to her like the shabbier parts of her hometown. So you keep asking her about her trip instead, and she answers, as if four weeks trudging through the desert is an interesting topic for two monarchs to discuss.

His city and wealth are impressive enough, though you don't see anything all that much greater than what is back in Sheba. But diplomacy demands a proper show of awe --even a few well chosen words of esteem for his God. So you gasp a controlled little gasp they'll all think escapes you; you curtsy; you

offer a flowery little speech praising his works, suspecting he knows perfectly well what is real in your voice. Your eyes are cast down, a proper suppliant, but from the corner you try to catch a glance of him scrutinizing you.

It's a show, of course. But in truth, there is something that does take your breath away: to find someone at last who runs as fine a place as you.

She comes up the mount with you, the most dramatic approach. When you get to the Temple, you can turn the conversation to God (though religion is never the safest topic). It allows you a moment to be properly humble, to acknowledge all your holdings and skills are due to Him. And to take a chance showing her a glimpse, at least, of what is hidden, that there is something you do revere, beyond your own power.

You pause where he tells you to stand in the courtyard, and now the gasp is real. It's not the location that amazes, although the position atop the hill is dramatic, nor the craftsmanship, which any reasonably well-paid guild could match. No, it is his description of the inner sanctum, where you don't even enter, where he admits even *he* can't enter. He could exaggerate and tell of ornaments and flourishes beyond imagination, of great marble statues depicting mighty godheads; you'll never see to know the truth. But instead he talks about an empty room, containing just a chest, containing just a tablet, just some scrolls, containing just the law, the law of God: and that is where his God dwells. You are taken aback at the idea that you might not need any bright sun or glowing moon to bow before, no heavenly or earthly body at all. And maybe this man's

wisdom comes from such unadorned places. And is about more than solving riddles.

The tour is complete. All the offerings have been made, the meal has been eaten, each rule of protocol followed by the book. The preliminaries now through, you're back in court, everyone waiting to see what happens next. You begin: a question for her, just to probe her mind a bit. From a case you judged last month; some property matter between a servant and his master. The response is quick. It is correct. It is phrased somewhat better than you had said it yourself.

He has harder questions up his sleeve, surely. But in good time, these things have to build. You parry with a problem from his scriptures, to catch him off-guard, to show him you've been studying.

The locus of her challenge is not on the nobler passages, and you could come back with all the familiar insults about her own constellation of gods. But it was just a playful tweak --a little ribald-- worth a tart double entendre or two in response.

The tone is set, then. You are both going to be a shade too arch.

Her voice takes on that synthetic pitch you sometimes hear in yourself.

He really ought to get out of that habit of talking in epigrams.

She could learn that sophistication doesn't mean tittering about breasts and circumcision.

A charade for him to solve; a couple servants are your props.

There is nothing that stumps you exactly, but she is smart enough to come close.

Don't let him catch you too impressed. Laugh like the solution was obvious.

Start giving one-word answers; let her think you are finding her conundrums shallow.

The puzzles and tests are starting to repeat themselves. Avoiding the really perplexing questions, still left beating in your blood.

Shouldn't you be moving beyond the games already? But somehow you're both still stuck on innuendos, and now gossip about the rites and kinks of local chieftains.

You keep expecting him to take the conversation in some new direction. But he pauses; waiting for your next word.

It's come to a standoff of sorts. You won't break her silence. You simply look at her.

The gaze is penetrating, and you wish it could draw out of you something that doesn't just pass for clever.

Does your smirk hide that, for the moment, you are at a loss?

You are stuck for something to say

...and what comes out is only another brain teaser.

She starts muttering some riddle you just heard the other week,

some nonsense about mascara tubes, and you could cut her off with the answer mid-sentence...

(You feign a measured tone, but he knows you know how inane that was)

...But what you do, quite involuntarily --and not all together politely-- is laugh. There is a pause...

...You pout. Then wink.

You nod. Then grin. One thing is clear, at last...

...There isn't a single silly riddle which has come your way that hasn't also gotten up to Jerusalem.

At last, a segue. The games may finally be over.

You can't keep doing this in front of an audience. It's time to dismiss the attendants.

You send your courtiers out. Let their imaginations run wild now.

They'll be concocting lewder scenarios than you two could ever play out...
even with all the phantoms and wraiths they'd put at your disposal.

Now is when the real gifts get exchanged. One decent conversation would be worth a lot more than a few donkeys laden with coins.

You'd rather she brought an open heart than all the gold from the South.

Some things don't have to be asked. He knows as well as you how malignant rumors grow.

She doesn't need to tell you she is not a witch. You know she

knows you don't spend your day talking to the animals.

Is he the one who lets down his guard first? Or is it you? Already it is so hazy, but someone, at last, starts speaking less like the monarch --and more like the mortal.

That is all either of you needs.

And now, a breathless volley from both directions:

"How bad are the Sheban summers?"

"Where do you find water in a drought?"

"How full do your granaries stay?"

"Do hungry subjects sleep naked outside your palace?"

"Does war unnerve you?"

"Do your fallen soldiers haunt you?"

"Does the night scare you?"

"Does the gold soothe you?"

"What did your mother teach you?"

"How did your father punish you?"

"How proud do their narges make you?"

"How proud would yours make them?"

"Does God speak to you?"

"How do you know how to answer?"

You're practically gulping for air, but the words keep spilling out.

The answers barely matter. Only this; you can finally ask what you could

never ask before.

The craving is greater than you have known; it breaks through a deep frost.

The famine is lifted; he is a banquet for your hungry heart, and mind.

Winter is past; it is a new season at last...

(You motion for him to rise up and come away.)

...A time to till has come. Everything turns pastoral.

You walk only as far as his bed, but it your longest journey.

And once again, without stepping outside, you are heading back up that mount of myrrh, that hill of frankincense.

You invite him into your garden, to eat its luscious fruits.

You look into her dove-like eyes, and work your way downward. Her lips are a crimson thread, her neck an ivory tower. Her two breasts like fawns, browsing in the bush.

His legs stand like marble pillars. His belly is a stone tablet; his lips are dry myrrh.

You take the kisses of her mouth.

His mouth is delicious.

Her mouth is the choicest wine.

Without a word, you speak to him all that is in your heart.

You give her all that she desires.

Not a single thing is hidden.

She's the one who surpasses her renown.

The half of it wasn't told you.

There in her arms, you enfold yourself, seeking an other kind of wisdom, to know finally what is Shalom.

Staying there until the day breaks, and the shadows flee away.

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By morning your bodies are drenched, and not in dew. There was little sleep for either of you, though pretty dreams were dreamt, ones that don't do much but vaporize in the light.

You linger, both of you, as long as you can, until the servants nearly break down your chamber door. They pictured you were snatched away by her during the night, abducted down to Sheba, or someplace further.

You watch how she acts when they come in with the basins and oil. She moves from the bed, so they can straighten the satin covers. She looks straight ahead. She doesn't cover herself, so you won't either. They will think what they'll think, even if you both had flung on a robe and pretended to be in conference. And, of course, they'd be right.

It's not quite over, not yet. There are more gifts to exchange; your governors are summoned for a brief audience. Another session of court. The priests won't come, but the magicians do. She doesn't take her eyes off them, not to meet your glance. A last meal for her caravan, while your herders water her camels. No chance for a private moment; you used

those up last night.

They say you gave her up because of her gods. But you've made room for the idols of your wives before. They say you found her out, and cast the scheming demon back down to the reaches below. They say underneath the jewels and robes and scents, she wasn't pretty enough --or worse. What woman would be running a country? They say you didn't know what to do with her, that there was no place in your harem for a queen. And only that comes close to the truth.

You climb to the top of your father's highest tower, to watch her train withdrawing back into the desert. She is too far already to tell if she looks back at you. You glance down at your hand, hanging by your side, clutching her veil. You wonder if she left it in your bed on purpose.

A visit to the temple doesn't seem fitting right now; what other animal would you sacrifice and what would it be for? You might stop by your map-maker, to have him show you Sheba again: Or write another song. But as you head back to the center of the city, you send your guard away and turn towards the palace, to the rooms where your wives linger

A gust from the desert blows softly by. You change directions again, and head for the court instead. For another afternoon on the throne.

The trip back feels much longer, even though the mood of your entourage

is merry. Everyone is exchanging stories about their time the land, and changing their minds about the first thing they want to do when they return to Sheba. Your stories you keep to yourself (different ones get told out of your earshot) and you know exactly what there is to do once you're back home.

At night, though, the desert gets quiet, as quiet as late that evening in his room. And out of the silence comes the same answer to your last question: you might give yourself, but you would never give your kingdom.

There were no decisions to make, really. Nobody was going to abdicate, and two countries joined in marriage never stay together long. However impressive his God is, you are not going to forsake what you believe, or ignore what you've been taught, or ask your people to abandon the sun.

You didn't invite him to pay a visit to Sheba; kings have a habit of wanting to conquer the cities they ride into. And you won't be making any trips back to Jerusalem. So you'll make do with the gifts he gave you --in the end not quite everything you desired-- but chests and strongboxes and spices and precious things carried on your camels...

...And in your womb. Something more than a souvenir.

Conclusion

Only a monarch, of course, can say with authority how much the public veneer of royalty intrudes on the interior lives of kings and queens. The rest of us are left with our conjectures, which probably reveal more about us --our dreams and fears, priorities and motives-- than about them.

The only view we actually have is when they are on display, and even then our reports are colored by the pomp and intimidation. For most of history and literature (Shakespeare notwithstanding) that would seem to tell us enough. The very idea that there is some core disparity between public and private, exterior and interior --for rulers or anyone else-- seems a twentieth century notion. The stories of yesteryear were rarely told in anything but the third person.

So it should be no surprise that most of the accounts in the Jewish tradition about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba do not really venture into the inner workings of their minds and hearts. Those questions are far less interesting to the rabbis and the storytellers than the lesson about a pagan who comes to know the superiority of the Jewish king and his God. The same holds true when Christian, Muslim, and Ethiopian tradition offer their own renderings of the story. The one common denominator in the accounts of all these cultures is that the king and queen, however vividly portrayed, are less characters in their own right than vehicles to advance the political and religious agendas of the people telling the story. Thus, the queen of the Tanakh praises the greatness of

Adonai, while the queen of the Koran swears submission to Allah. Her journey in the Christian renderings is a prefiguring of the trip of the Magi, and her path takes her across wooden planks that become pieces of the true cross. The queen in Ethiopian legend is an Ethiopian queen; when she leaves Israel, the *Shechina* departs with her. The child she bears by Solomon returns to Jerusalem and makes off with the Ark of the Covenant, which Ethiopians believe remains in their possession to this day. Even writers who are not offering religious defenses have their own designs, whether to tweak pompous official convention, or to conjure up love stories with a fantasy figure par excellence, a woman exotic or sexy or smart or dangerous enough to entrance the ultimate ladies' man.

What we are left with, in the end, is nothing but speculation. We can run with the hints or ignore the implications, debating the hidden meanings of words and phrases intangible as vapor, and all the more elusive in the imperfection of translation: "Perplexing questions." "In the name of Adonai." "All that was in her heart's mind." "Left breathless." "All that she desired."

These remain their toughest riddles.

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